

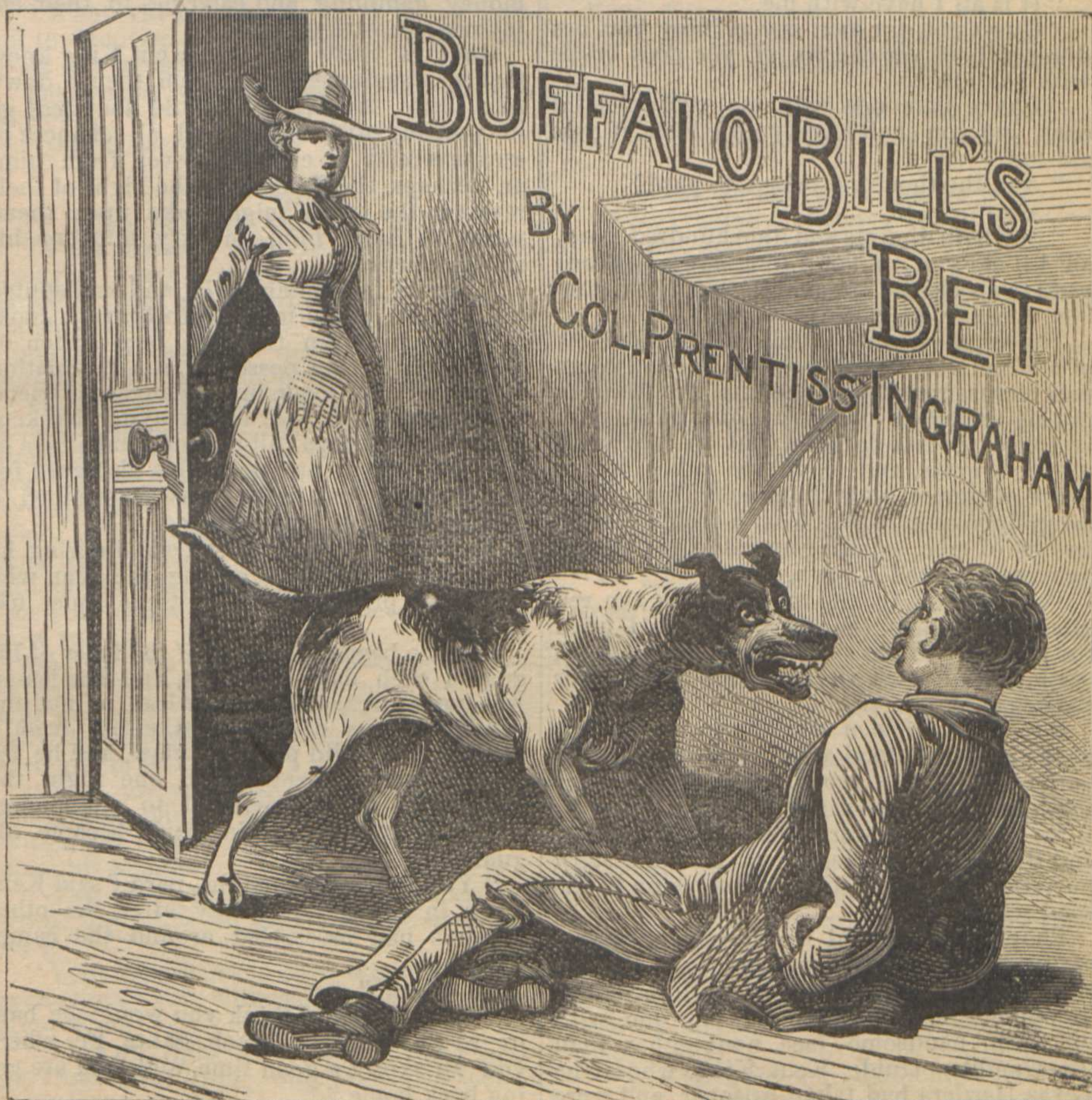
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"GREAT GOD! HAVE YOU NO HEART, WOMAN? DO YOU NOT SEE THIS MONSTER UPON ME, AND THAT I AM GOING MAD?" HE GROANED.

Buffalo Bill's Bet; OR, THE GAMBLER GUIDE.

A Romance of Western Trails.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM,
AUTHOR OF "BUFFALO BILLY, THE BOY BULL-
WHACKER," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

TEMPTED.

"ONE thousand *pesos* for my life."

"You holds it cheap, pard."

"It is all I have with me."

"Guess not, for men say as how you hes dimints 'bout yer clothes, ef yer goes broke with gold-dust."

"I have diamonds with me; two splendid ones, and you shall have your choice if you aid me."

"And the thousand *pesos* too, pard?"

"Yes."

"Say both dimints and nine hundred *pesos*, an' I'll aid yer, an' yer'd then hev a hundred *pesos* to speckilate on, an' yer is a born gambler men say, so won't go broke long."

The speakers were standing in the shadow of a large tree, and the scene around them was picturesque in the extreme, for the open prairie stretched upon the one hand, with two-score horses lariatied out to feed upon the rich grass, and upon the other was a grove of timber, now illuminated by a dozen camp-fires, around which sat a dashing, reckless set of men, smoking and talking over the dangers they had known.

The bivouac in the woods, with the red glare of the fires, the horses picketed upon the prairie, and the silvery light of the moon casting a halo over all, made up a scene for the brush of an artist.

But the two men standing in the shadow of the tree that stood alone, as it were, a few yards out of the grove, cared not for the scene of beauty before their eyes.

No, their eyes were bent on each other, and their thoughts were bent on some stern purpose, which the story will develop to the kind reader.

Those who followed me through the pages of the precursor to this romance, "Buffalo Billy, the Boy Bullwhacker," will recognize in one of the two men, the tall one, with the dark, handsome face, none other than the Gambler Guide, Kent King, whom the Texas Herders had taken prisoner, and were carrying with them to the Lone Star State, where the doom of death awaited him, for crimes committed in the past.

Now, as he stood by the side of the Texan, who was that night his guard, the glare of the firelight on the one side, and the radiance of the moonlight upon the other showed that he was securely bound hand and foot.

Down from the north the band of Texans had made their way, dashing through the Indians that had opposed them, and without fear, heading for their homes, which they had left months before, to drive a herd of cattle to the settlers of the northern territories.

A bivouac or two more and the Revolver Riders, as the band of Herders were called, would be in Santa Fe, toward which gay place they were destined, that they might pass a week or two there in spending their money, gambling, and catering to their enjoyment in various ways.

Once in Santa Fe, and Kent King knew that he was doomed, for, from thence down into Texas the Herders would doubtless go in company with trains, and all chances of escape would be cut off forever from him; or, perhaps, the Texans, in the hight of their revels in the town, might take upon themselves to hang him, and try him for his crimes afterward.

A man of indomitable will, and undisputed courage, he would meet death bravely, looking it squarely in the face, come when or how it might; but possessed of a fascination of manner that made him a dangerous friend to women, a talent for card-playing that kept his pockets always full of gold, and a love of life that was as strong as his disregard for the lives of others, he was determined to make a bold attempt to escape.

To do so by physical force and daring he knew was impossible among the men who held him prisoner, and he there must use strategy.

First he began the study of the faces of his guards each day and night, and the lesson was not an agreeable one for him, as not one exhibited signs of weakness, either from a merciful or sordid point of view, and he became almost hopeless, until one night, the same when he is presented to our reader, Poker Dick, one of the band, became his guard.

"You look blue to-night, pard," said Kent King, in his pleasant way, after the other Herders had assembled around the camp-fires.

"I *is* blue."

"Why, I should think you would be happy, as we will soon reach Sante Fe, where you all expect a good time, and then are going back home."

"Home is what makes me blue, pard, fer I hes lost to ther boys all I got fer my leetle drove o' hoof-critters, an' I'm going back to

ther old folks without a *peso*, unless I kin win some dust in Sante Fe."

"I have some money with me."

"Guess yer will keep it, too."

"Not if you want it."

"Pard, I isn't ther man ter take gold from a corpse, fer yer is leetle more, seein' as how yer'll be h'isted as soon as we reach Texas."

"That is just what I wish to avoid. I have gold with me, and if by any chance I could escape, why then you wouldn't have to go back poor."

The man started and turned pale, for the wily tempter had touched his sordid nature.

"Well, Poker Dick, what say you? I have gold and you have none."

"What will yer give me, pard, fer ter drop off to sleep an' let yer skip?" asked Poker Dick in a whisper.

Then came the answer that opens this story:

"*One thousand pesos for my life!*"

CHAPTER II.

A DOUBLE REWARD FOR LIFE.

To the prisoner and his guard the time dragged wearily along, and the song and laughter from around the camp-fires grated harshly upon their ears, for the one stood upon the threshold of death, with one step across to life; but would that step be taken?

The guard, although knowing that nine hundred *pesos*, with diamonds worth five times that sum, would soon be his, was in no more cheerful mood than when he had been moneyless, for his heart told him that he was about to betray his comrades, and set free a man whose mission on earth seemed to be to kill and to bring unhappiness, and whom he knew his captain had some bitter feud of the past against.

One by one the Texans wrapped themselves in their blankets and sunk to sleep, and gradually the fires burned down, and only the moonlight lit up the scene, still picturesque in its silence.

"Well, are you ready to keep your word?" asked Kent King in a low tone, raising himself on his elbow, for he was lying down upon his blanket.

"Yas, I hes promised, an' I'll keep my word; but I hes ter take some punishment fer it."

"Your conscience! Bah! what right have such men as you with consciences?" sneered Kent King.

"I hes no right ter it, fer it don't keep me from doin' wrong, only makes me sick at heart."

"You are a fool, Poker Dick; lie down and go to sleep; the boys know you have played cards late each night, and you were over-

come with sleep; see here, you need not free my hands, for my sharp teeth have gnawed the thongs, and I can easily untie those around my ankles," and Kent King held up his hands, which the rawhide ropes fell off of.

"You is a very devil, guide, and ef I hadn't promised ter let yer go, guess I might hev dropped ter sleep an' felt yer knife atween my ribs; but yer hes awful sharp teeth."

"And they are my own, not bought, pard; now where is my horse?"

"The last one on ther pararer, thar."

"And my saddle and arms?"

"Lies yonder ag'in' thet stump; now whar is my *pesos* an' my di'mints?"

Kent King ceased untying the thongs around his ankles, and unbuckled a belt from about his waist, and which was heavy with gold.

"Here is the dust, but I want one hundred *pesos* to stake me for a game in Santa Fe."

"Cusses! yer isn't goin' thar be yer?"

"I am; there's no better place in the world to gamble, and there I go."

"But we goes thar."

"What care I? Free, I am on equal terms with Captain Dash, your leader."

"Better not gamble on that, pard, as ther capt'in is ther boss."

"I do not fear him, and to Santa Fe I go, though you may not see me there; here, I have my two slugs* of fifty each, and here is the balance."

"All right, pard; now ther di'mints."

"They are here in this little pocket in the belt—see!"

"I sees, an' I is obleeged; now thar lies yer saddle, an' yer rifle is tied to it, with yer pistols, as yer knows, tho' they isn't loaded."

"You will give me ammunition of course."

"Yer ammunition is in yer saddle pockets."

"Good! bring the saddle and bridle here, and then I will start."

The Texan thrust the bag of gold into the bosom of his shirt, walked to the edge of the grove and took up the saddle, and returned to where the Gambler stood.

"Yes, here are my pistols, and—take that!"

Down upon the head of the guard as quick as the lightning's flash fell the barrel of the revolver, and with a low moan the man fell in his tracks.

"Now the gold and diamonds are mine! Ha! who is that?" and Kent King glanced over to one of the camp-fires, where a man

*Fifty dollars in gold.

had suddenly raised himself to his feet, and stood brightening up the coals as though he were cold.

Hastily Kent King thrust his hands into the pockets of the guard, and not finding the bag of gold, uttered a bitter oath.

"Curse him! what did he do with it? But I have no time to lose, for life is dearer than mines of gold to me," and quickly picking up his saddle, and keeping the tree between himself and the man still standing at the fire, he ran swiftly out upon the prairie and soon stood by the side of his splendid horse.

"Ah! my brave old Mephisto, again I will be on your back with free hands to strike back at my foes, and then I fear not even Captain Dash and his band."

The saddle was quickly thrown on and securely girthed, the bridle followed next, and then the lariat-pin was drawn up and the rope coiled, and with a bound the Gambler was upon the back of his noble steed, which bounded away like an arrow from a bow, just as a loud shout was raised in the camp, and thirty Texans sprung to their feet in alarm.

"The prisoner! the Gambler! there he goes!" cried a ringing voice.

It was the man who had arisen at the fire, and who, seeing the moving, crouching form, had approached the tree to find Poker Dick lying as though dead, and the prisoner free and mounting his horse fifty yards away.

"To horse! a thousand pesos to the man who takes him dead or alive!" cried Captain Dash, in ringing tones, and two minutes after he sped away in pursuit, and behind him came a score of his men, while far out on the moonlit prairie was seen the dark form of Mephisto and his daring rider flying like the wind, for life lay ahead of them, and death was hard on their track.

CHAPTER III.

THE FORFEIT.

"PARDS, it's no use; thet horse o' his are a goer from Goersville, an' he jist kept right ahead o' ther cap'n's mare," said Prairie Pete, the guide, riding back into the timber, after half an hour's chase of the fugitive Gambler.

"Lady hain't in good trim, Pete, jist now, as yer know she's a leetle lame; ef not, she'd hev overtook ther My-fist-toe, as that Gambler calt his animile," answered a Texan, who had also just returned and dismounted.

"Did he kill Poker Dick?" asked a third, riding up.

"No; I guesses it were better ef he had," responded a young giant, with blonde hair falling to his waist.

All looked at the speaker, who was known as Seven-Foot Harry, on account of his great height; but he shrugged his shoulders knowingly and made no reply, and a moment after Captain Dash rode up, his brow stern, and his gaunt-bodied racing mare limping badly.

"The pace was too fast for Lady, boys, lame as she is, so he escaped; *but only for a time.*"

There was something in the tone of their leader that told his men that Kent King would find a dangerous man upon his trail, in Captain Dash, who seemed determined to yet track him to the bitter end.

In his fancy dress, half-buckskin, half Mexican, Captain Dash looked exceedingly handsome, for his face was flushed with his rapid ride; but the beauty of his expressive mouth was marred by the stern look resting upon it, while in his dark-blue eyes dwelt a light that was almost cruel.

"Captain, Ben Tabor wanted me ter say that he would like ter see yer, when yer returned," said Seven-Foot Harry.

"Where is Tabor?"

"Over in ther woods yonder, nursin' Poker Dick."

"He was on guard when Kent King escaped! Was he hurt?"

"Suthin' ails him, cap'n; I'll show yer," and Seven-Foot Harry led the way to where a camp-fire had been made some distance off from the others.

Pacing to and fro before the burning logs was Ben Tabor, a frank-faced young Texan, who now wore a troubled look that ill became him.

Before the fire was a prostrate form, rolled in his blankets, and as motionless as though dead.

"Well, Tabor, is that Poker Dick, and is he hurt?" asked Captain Dash as he walked up to where the two men were.

"That is Poker Dick, captain, and he's hurt," was the quiet response, and a look of pain came over the face of the young Texan.

"Poor fellow; I was angry with him for allowing the Gambler to escape, but I'll forgive him now, for—"

"Pard, don't yer say nuthin' kind ter me, or it'll break my heart, tough as it are," and the form arose from the blanket, and the blood-besmeared face of Poker Dick was turned full upon his chief, a slight gash in the forehead showing where Kent King had struck him with his pistol, the blow momentarily stunning him.

"Why, Dick, old fellow, I don't want to blame you, so tell me how it was?" and Captain Dash rested his hand kindly on the other's shoulder.

But the man drew back quickly, and said in trembling tones:

"Don't tech me, cap'n, don't tech me, fer I is awful wicked."

"Poor fellow, the blow has turned his mind—"

"No, cap'n, mind hain't hurt, but my heart are. Tell him, Ben, for I hesn't ther power, an' ther words would choke me."

Impressed with the strange manner of Poker Dick, Captain Dash turned to Ben Tabor, who said sadly:

"I hate to tell, too, Dick, but I cannot help it; Captain Dash, I was the first one to get to Dick, and finding him senseless, I remained, while the other boys went in chase of King."

"You did right, as you saw that he was wounded."

"I only wish some one else had been in my place, for they would have to tell what I found."

"And what was it, Ben?" asked the captain; but before he got a reply Poker Dick spoke up:

"Cap'n, Ben hes a heart like a woman an' don't want to tell on his old pard, Dick, so I'll spit the story out myself, an' I'll feel better, for it gives me a awful bad taste in my mouth an' pain in my heart."

"Yer see, cap'n, I was guard ter-night, an' late ther boys hes won all my dust from me, an' I got low spirited, an' thet devil Kent King told me he'd give me a belt o' gold an' some di'mints, ef I'd—"

"By Heaven! you turned traitor and accepted his bribe," cried Captain Dash in angry tones.

"Jist so; you hes cut ther story down to ther kernel darn quick, cap'n; he give me nine hundred pesos in gold slugs, an' two di'mints as was worth five times thet much; Ben hes 'em, for he found 'em on me, an' knowin' as I was dead broke afore, he sighted my leetle game, knowed I were a darn rascal, and played ther trump on me, an' here I is."

"And that blow on your head, sir?"

"Thet were a keepsake given me as a partin' present from Kent King, fer arter he hed gi'n me his gold an' di'mints, an' I fotched him his saddle, he jist tapped me on ther head, ter get back his wealth I reckon, but ther boys must hev crowded him too fast."

"And you found this belt of gold upon him, Tabor?"

"Yes, Captain Dash; I was fearful he had been wounded in the side, and searching, found the belt, and seeing it in my hand when he came to, Poker Dick told me all."

"And you know the forfeit for one of our band to become a traitor, sir?" and Captain Dash turned sternly upon the prisoner.

"I does, cap'n; it are death," was the firm reply.

"Dick, never would I have suspected you of such an act; and your temptation was great; but you have set free a man whose life has been one long crime, and who injured me deeply, and is now at liberty to harm these I care for."

"That he will do so, if in his power, I knew full well, and I must start on his trail ere it be too late—"

"He said he were going ter Santa Fe, cap'n, for thar he would be on ekal tarms with you!"

"Those are the terms I wish to meet him on; but now to the crime you have committed," and Captain Dash looked the traitor squarely in the face.

"Yas, cap'n, I is list'nin'."

"You have kindred living at Austin, I believe?"

"Ther old folks live thar, cap'n. My father an' my mother, an' I hes a leetle brother o' seventeen."

"This gold I will send to them, and put with it a hundred pesos of my own, and I know the boys will do the same."

"I'll give a hundred, cap'n," said Ben Tabor.

"And I'll chip in ther same," put in Seven-Foot Harry.

"Well, all that is added will go to your parents, Dick, and more; they shall never know that you were a traitor, but believe you were killed by Kent King instead of wounded."

"You intends ter kill me then, cap'n?"

"You know the forfeit is death."

"Yas; ther's no gittin' 'round thet, an' I desarves it; but yer'll send ther old folks ther gold, fer they depends on me ter keep ther pot b'ilin'."

"Yes; but the diamonds I will keep for a special purpose."

"You kin hev 'em, cap'n, fer I s'pose they is mine, seein' as I made a swap with the Gambler fer 'em; but when is I ter hev my chips called in, cap'n?"

"I will soon tell you; and, Dick, if I can save you I will, as you have confessed all, and from my heart I pity you. Harry, you and Ben remain here until I return."

"I'll not attempt ter skip, cap'n; but ther boys hed better stay, so as yer'll feel yer've got me," called out the poor prisoner, as Captain Dash walked away toward the camp-fire, around which the other members of the band were gathered.

CHAPTER IV.

DIGGING HIS OWN GRAVE.

WITH eager eyes, staring as a starving man at food he could not touch, Poker Dick

watched Captain Dash as he joined the band of Texans, and saw them gather around him in an excited way, while the bright firelight falling upon their faces told him they were listening to the story of his crime, which they found hard to believe.

Having heard the tale of his treachery, the prisoner saw them all sit down around the fire, and each moment then seemed an eternity, for well he knew that his life was in their hands, and that when he had joined the Revolver Riders, oaths of membership bound them together, which to break death would be the forfeit.

Once before a man of the band had proven traitor, and his life had been spared by the vote of all, and shortly after he had deserted and become a bandit, leaguering himself with Mexicans and Indians.

With his return for their mercy before them would they spare him? thought Poker Dick, and he answered the question himself:

"I guess not; ef ther boys did, they'd be fools, an' I will hev ter pass in my chips; they seems 'arnest bout suthin', pards," and he turned to Seven-Foot Harry and Ben Tabor.

"The captain seems pleading for you, Dick," answered Tabor.

"Yas, he's powerful good; but I guesses the boys will string me."

"I hopes not, Dick, fer I fer one decides ter pardon yer," remarked Seven-Foot Harry.

"Tain't no use, boys, I is ter be called on for what chips I has got, an' ther game's ag'in' me, fer I don't hold a trump keerd; see, two o' ther boys is comin'."

Two of the herders had left the camp-fire and were coming toward the guards and their prisoner, who watched their approach in silence.

"It's Dave and Rio Grande Mike," said Tabor, as they drew near.

"Ben Tabor, you and Seven-Foot is ter go over ter whar ther cap'n is, and we takes yer place, for yer opinion is wanted," remarked Rio Grande Mike, a stalwart-looking man of forty.

"All right; come, Harry," said Ben Tabor, and the two men walked away, while Poker Dick asked quietly:

"Does it go ag'in' me, boys?"

"It do, Dick; yer hed friends in this here camp, 'til yer let yer appetite fer dust go ag'in' yer wisdom," said Mike.

"Pard, yer head is level; ther dust an' ther di'mints got me clean off my base, an' I has ter cave; but afore long some o' you will follow ther same trail, as we hes all got ter travel it. I sees that Seven-Foot an' Ben is chinnin' lively fer me."

"Yas, but it won't do no good, Dick, as

ther boys wouldn't listen ter ther cap'n, would they, Dave?"

"No, Mike, and he spoke hard in your favor, Poker Dick; but now you will know all, for they are coming," and Mike motioned to the band that had left the council-fire, and were coming toward the guards and the unfortunate prisoner.

Not a quiver of Poker Dick's face showed any emotion as the silent, stern-looking men came near and formed in a circle around him, while Captain Dash said in a low, but distinct tone:

"Dick Martin, I regret more than I can express to have to say to you that your act this night, in aiding the escape of Kent King, that accursed Gambler Guide of the Hale emigrant train, has cost you your life."

"I deserves all yer can say ag'in' me, pards, so don't let up on me," was the quiet rejoinder.

"No, I throw no abuse or words of unkindness in the teeth of a man who stands on the brink of his grave."

"I have urged that your comrades overlook your crime this once, and give you another trial; but there are but three of us beg this favor against twenty-seven who say you must die."

"All right, cap'n, I is willin', only you'll keep yer promise about ther old folks, an' not let 'em know I was hanged for a traitor; tell 'em I was kilt by Injuns, or any lie yer want ter."

"They shall never know, for we are pledged to keep the cause and manner of your death secret; and more, Dick: your comrades have subscribed liberally for your parents, and Ben Tabor will put the money in their hands."

"Ben, put it thar, old pard; an' when yer see the old folks, jist lie like a Injun fer me, as I knows you kin; make 'em proud o' me, ef I is under ground, an' hes a rope mark round my neck," and the doomed man grasped the hand of Ben Tabor, and all present were more deeply moved than he was.

"Have you any request to make, Dick, that I can attend to for you?" asked Captain Dash.

"Let Ben take my horse and my shootin'-irons ter me leetle brother, cap'n."

"He shall; anything else?"

"How long hes I ter live?"

"One hour."

"Goin' ter be stretched, I s'pose, cap'n?"

"No, I have decided that six of the boys shall shoot you."

"I'd like that, cap'n, fer I hain't no dog ter be hung; but don't let me know who drops on me, as I doesn't want ter die with no hard feelin' ag'in' my pards. Let 'em stan'

back in ther shadder with ther sixes, an I'll stan' in ther fire-light, an' they kin get the drop on me beautiful."

"It shall be as you wish, Dick," said Captain Dash, and his voice trembled.

"An', cap'n, I'd like ter grip ther boys' han's all round 'fore I goes, an' as I feels kinder chilly, I'd be pleased ter dig ther hole I is ter be put in, or does yer intend ter leave me out fer coyote provender?"

Captain Dash and many another stern man started at this strange request, and a murmur ran through the crowd; but the leader answered quickly:

"No, you shall be decently buried, Dick."

"Waal, I thank ye; I'd be tough eatin' even fer a coyote; an' ye'll let me dig ther hole, cap'n?"

"Dig your own grave, Dick?"

"Yas; it's all I kin do fer myself on 'arth now, an' I doesn't know any pra'ers ter tackle; let me dig it, cap'n?" and a pleading look came into Poker Dick's eyes.

"I cannot refuse you, Dick, strange as the request is."

"Thank ye, cap'n; whar is yer goin' ter plant me?"

"Select your own resting-place, Dick."

"I guess right here'll do, fer it don't make much difference, do it?"

The man took the hatchet, handed him oy Ben Tabor, and selecting a place where the earth was soft, quickly went to work, cutting down into the ground.

Aided by his knife also, and using a stirrup for a shovel, he worked as diligently at his grave as though he were digging for the gold that had cost him his life.

"Thet's deep enough, I guesses, fer I doesn't want ter be too fur down when Gabriel toots us ter jedgmint, as ther pulpit-bangers says he'll do. Now, cap'n, I is ready, soon as I says good-by ter Mollie Burns; I named ther critter arter a leetle gal I ust ter go ter school with in North Car'liny twenty year ago, an' I hes named every critter I hes had, horse or mare, mule or dog, since I knowed ther gal, Mollie Burns."

Seven-Foot Harry led the mare up to her master, who patted her affectionately, and still showing the same calm demeanor, said:

"Good-by, old gal; I tole yer namesake good-by twenty year ago, an' I hes never see'd her since, an' I'll never see you ag'in. Now, cap'n, I is ready."

At a word from their leader the men ranged themselves in line, and passed by the doomed man, grasping his hand in grim, silent farewell, and then continuing on into the darkness beyond the firelight.

"Now, cap'n, here's my last grip, an' it's not with ther hand thet tu'k ther slugs an'

di'mints. Good-by, for I is goin' over ther dark river, an' you'll follow afore long."

Captain Dash grasped the man's hand, and then called out:

"Men, once more I ask it: spare this brave man's life."

A hoarse, low, stern answer came from back in the shadow:

"No!"

The leader bowed his head a moment, but quickly recovering himself, placed the doomed man at the end of his grave, and called out in stern tones:

"Are you ready?"

A low assent came from the darkness beyond.

"One! two! three! *fire!*"

Six revolvers flashed together, and without a moan Poker Dick fell across the grave he had dug.

CHAPTER V.

A RETROSPECTIVE GLANCE.

SOME three months prior to the opening of this story, the Hale emigrant train had pulled out from Leavenworth, bound for Colorado, under the guidance of a noted gambler, who had suddenly offered his services to run the settlers to their destination.

This Gambler Guide was Kent King, a man well known as a good prairie scout, yet supposed to think too much of his comfort to take to the hardships of an overland journey again.

A skillful card-player, he always had plenty of money, and, with the education of a gentleman, he was very popular in the society of that day, and rumor said had broken many a young heart that had trusted him.

Judge Hale, the head and front of the settler's train, was warned against his Gambler Guide, and told that he was only going in that capacity on account of sweet Mary Hale, the only child of the judge; but the warning was unheeded, and the train pulled out on its way to the Far West, and a perfect plainsman, a dead shot, and a man of undisputed courage, there were many along who congratulated themselves upon their securing so good a guide.

But from the first it was evident that Mary Hale was the attraction of Kent King, as it was also that the judge seemed willing that his daughter should receive the attentions of the guide, and in fact encouraged them to such an extent that Parson Miller, an emigrating preacher along with the train, was notified to hold himself in readiness to perform a marriage ceremony within a few days, and that the wedding would have taken place there is no doubt, but for the timely arrival in camp of one who is the hero of this story.

That one was Buffalo Billy, as he was then called, for he was but fifteen years of age, though he could do a man's work and had a lion's courage.

Along the border the youth's handsome face and fine form were well known, and his deeds of daring had won him a reputation that caused men to regard him as their equal, for, from the time he killed his first Indian, when ten years old, to a short while before when he guided a silver-train from Colorado to Leavenworth, his life had been full of thrilling adventure.

When at school together, pretty Mary Hale had been the sweetheart of Buffalo Billy, and he now realized that she was a woman, and he but a boy in years, and gave up all silly hopes of carrying on the love affair; but he knew Kent King thoroughly, had ordered him to cease his visits to his sister Jule, and was determined that he would protect the daughter of the judge from his persecutions.

That his joining the train, some days after its departure from Leavenworth, was a cause of rejoicing to Mary, and of regret to Kent King, Buffalo Bill saw at a glance; but when he heard that the maiden, with the consent of her father, was to be forced into an immediate marriage with the Gambler Guide, a quarrel followed, and the youth was at once exiled from the camp.

Yet still he was not nonplused, but sought out a character of the train, whose bargaining propensities had gained for him the name of Old Negotiate, and held a conversation with him, the result of which was the conclusion between them that without a parson there could be no wedding.

And there was no wedding, for the next morning the parson and Old Negotiate went on a hunt, the former got lost and was found by Buffalo Bill, and when they at last reached the train, weeks after, they were accompanied by a band of Texas herders known as Revolver Riders.

This band the reader has already met in this story, in the party of Captain Dash and his men.

Their arrival in the camp of the settlers had caused a change, for Kent King was taken prisoner by Captain Dash, who determined to carry him to Texas, to be tried there for crimes committed, and Buffalo Billy was made the Boy Guide of the train to Denver, the judge seeming delighted at the change, for he had been acting under a power held over him by the Gambler, who held some secret of his past life.

The reader has seen the temptation of Poker Dick, his fall, the escape and flight of Kent King and the punishment of the unfortunate guard by the Revolver Riders, and

I will now ask him to accompany me to a pleasant home situated about five miles from Leavenworth.

In the comfortable sitting-room sat an elderly lady, upon whose face yet remained the traces of former beauty, though it was wan and pale now, for she was an invalid.

Near her sat two maidens, her daughters, and one of them was reading aloud a letter just received from the Far West, and as the contents of which will interest my kind reader, I will give them.

"Dood, read the letter again, for I wish to hear of my boy," said the Widow Cody.

"I will, mother," answered Jule Cody, whose nickname was Dood, and she read as follows, while her sister Martha looked over her shoulder with deep interest:

"MY DEAR DOOD:—

"We are at last comfortably fixed in our new home, not very far from Denver, and my father has already begun his cattle-raising, hoping to become in a few years a cattle king.

"Some of our train-men have gone to mining, and hope for fortunes; but the most are settled near us.

"But I must tell you of our adventurous trip out here, for we owe our safety to your noble brother, Billy, who overtook our train just in time to prevent my being forced into a marriage with your old lover Kent King, who was our guide—"

Here followed the story as the reader knows it, and then the letter went on:

"After reaching Denver, Billy left us to go to the mines, where he had some important duty to perform, he said, and we have not seen him since, but I do hope he returned home in safety—"

"No, no, he has not come; oh, where is my poor boy now?" sighed the widow.

"Here, mother!"

The door was thrown open and into the room bounded a tall, wiry form, with broad shoulders, small waist, hands and feet, and a face that was almost womanly in its beauty.

His eyes were large, black and full of fire, though long lashes gave them a dreamy look except when they flashed in anger or excitement; his hair was hanging far down his back, and his darkly-bronzed face was tinted with health.

Clad in buckskin, and with a slouch hat turned up upon one side, wearing cavalry boots, armed with spurs, and having a rifle slung at his back, and a pair of revolvers and knife in his belt, he was the very perfection of a young border hero.

"My son! my son!" cried the fond mother, and she fell upon his broad breast, and burst into tears of joy.

"Now, mother, I will tell you and the girls where I have been," he said, after the greetings were over.

"Oh, we know, sir, for we have just had a letter from Mary Hale," said Jule archly.

"Ah! did she tell you that Kent King—"

"Yes, she told us all, Billy, and that you

had gone to the mines to perform an important duty," quickly said Jule Cody, as though anxious to turn the conversation away from the Gambler Guide.

"And I performed that duty, Jule, though I owe my being here now, to Little Gray, my noble horse," said Buffalo Billy, impressively, and his mother looked up in alarm, and he continued:

"Oh, the danger is all over now, mother; but you know when Wild Bill sent me East with that train of thirteen silver miners?"

"Yes, and they paid you so well for guiding them," said Martha.

"True, and I have brought back now a snug little sum, I got from the Hale train going west, and coming east, Wild Bill made me guide of Russell, Majors and Waddell's bull outfit, and I am flush; here, mother," and the youth threw a buckskin bag full of gold into his mother's lap; but the danger he had hinted at interested her more than his earnings, and she asked him to tell her of himself.

"Oh, yes, I was going to say, that when our wagon broke down on that trip with the miners, we *cached* the silver, and come on East, the men intending, after a visit to their homes, to return to Colorado and work out their leads, and then pick the buried treasure up, when again homeward bound.

"But there was one terror in that gang, for, to get possession of all that silver they had buried, he began a systematic plan of murder, and one by one he killed his comrades; but somehow I suspected his little game, and determined to trump him, as the boys say in playing cards, mother; but he was a lightning life-taker, and the day I reached the mines, Carl Moran, for such was his name, had rolled a large stone into the shaft, crushing to death the last of the unlucky thirteen, excepting himself.

"But I laid for him, and coming east with the bull outfit, I kept my eye upon the silver train to which he belonged, and caught him just at the right time, as he was digging up the *cached* silver, to put in a wagon, he had left the train with for that purpose.

"Ah! we had it hot, I can tell you, and he was getting the best of me, when I called Little Gray, and the bully little horse just ran up and seizing Mr. Carl Moran by the back of the neck, pulled him off of me, and there was dead meat there right off—"

"What, my son?"

"A stiff, mother."

"I do not understand you, my son."

"Oh, I forgot; I mean that Carl Moran passed in his checks—ah, that is, I killed him."

"Was it necessary to take his life, William?"

"It was his life or mine, mother; I followed Scripture," replied Buffalo Billy, though if called on for the part of the Scripture he referred to, he would have been more at a loss to find it than to get out of the middle of the *Llano Estacado*.

"And, mother," resumed the youth, "I sent the silver to the families of the twelve miners Moran had killed, dividing his share among them, and, as our train pulled into Leavenworth this morning, here I am."

"And, I hope, to remain, my son."

"No, mother, for I have been offered a place as Pony Express Rider on the Overland, and start West again in about two weeks."

"Oh, Billy! will you never end this wild, roving, dangerous life you are leading?"

"I fear not, mother; I am making money, and I must take my chances, come what may."

CHAPTER VI.

BUFFALO BILL'S BET.

IN one of the most popular resorts of Leavenworth, and combining hotel, bar and card-room, a large crowd of men had assembled, as was their wont every evening, to while away the time.

The shuffle of cards, click of faro chips, clink of glasses and hum of voices, mingled together continually, with now and then a hearty laugh and fearful oath rising above the other sounds.

It was a motley gathering, for there were returned miners, liberally gambling away their silver and gold-dust, plainsmen, back after a long trip westward, teamsters, bullwhackers, scouts, soldiers, cattle-men, a few Indians, and vagabonds and general dead-beats, hanging round to be treated, and to pick up a dishonest penny when possible.

At one table were gathered some cattleherders, lately arrived from Texas, and as they were playing for large stakes, those uninterested elsewhere in the room had been drawn to the point of most interest to them.

"Pards, hesn't I seen yer physymhogamys before?" suddenly asked a queer-looking character, forcing his way through the crowd, and confronting the Texans, one of whom answered pleasantly:

"I think you have; you were one of the Hale train we struck on the trail."

"You hes it right; I were ther boss teamster, but I'll lay yer a prime pelt ag'in' that pile o' money thet yer can't call my handle."

A general laugh followed the remark of the borderman, and the Texan who had before spoken, answered:

"I will bet you wine for all round that I can, for the money is not mine, and I guess you haven't a pelt along with you."

"Done; wine fer all 'ceptin' ther dead-beats."

"But how are we to pick them out?"

"Oh, I knows 'em, Texas; now, come, what's my appellation?"

"*Old Negotiate*," answered the Texan with a laugh.

A shout followed his reply, and the borderman said in a lugubrious tone:

"By ther Rockies! Yer hev calt me, pard; I is gettin' too darned well known in these parts; waal, what do you an' yer pards drink?"

"We are one against many, and I believe in fair play, so you and your friends drink with us," frankly answered the Texan, and turning to the crowd he continued:

"Gentlemen, join us; wine here, bar-keeper."

"Hold on, pard, let me sift ther dead-beats out, fer—"

"No, no, *Old Negotiate*, I include all in my invitation; fill up all round, barkeeper."

The corks popped, the wine went round, and the health of the handsome Texan was drank with a cheer, after which *Old Negotiate* said:

"Pard, when last I see yer, thar were in your comp'ny a man by ther name o' Kent King."

"Yes, the Gambler Guide, whom our captain was taking to Texas."

"Thet were ther man; has he passed in yit?"

"No, he escaped from us, when we were near Santa Fe."

"Escaped!"

"The Gambler Guide free?"

"Kent King not dead!"

Such were the expressions that ran round the crowd, after a general exclamation of surprise, that followed the Texan's announcement.

"Yer say he escaped, an' from *you*?"

"He certainly did."

"Didn't go by the way of a h'ist to a tree?"

"No; he gnawed the thongs from his wrist, secured his saddle and horse, and, though we gave hot chase, managed to escape."

"Boys, thar'll be music in ther air afore long in Leav'worth, fer every man, woman, an' kid heur hes been givin' Kent King ther devil, as wuss nor a horse-thief, and he'll come back fer a reckoning, or I are a screech-in' liar, an' I bet a lariat ag'in' a horse on it."

"On which, *Negoshy*, that you are a liar, or thet King comes back?" asked one of the crowd.

"I'll bet both, or t'other way, jist fer ther

negotiate, pard, ef it suits yer; but, by ther Rockies, Buffalo Billy better look out, now thet wolf am on his trail."

"You refer to the youth who was instrumental in his capture?" asked the Texan.

"Come ag'in, pard, fer I is'nt hell on book l'arnin'."

"Buffalo Billy was the one who run him to cover, I mean?"

"Yer has it; he are, an' thet Kent King will kill him yet."

"I'll bet on it he does too, or strike him hard through his mother and sisters," said one of the crowd.

"I fear you is right," answered another. "Billy hes got ter look sharp, or I'll bet high the gambler kills him."

"*I'll take the bet.*"

The clear voice caused all to start and turn, and the subject of conversation was before them.

"Buffalo Billy! three cheers!" cried a voice, and a ringing salute was given him, as he forced his way to the table, and asked quietly:

"Who is betting against my life?"

"Put it thar, pard; now I'll tell yer," cried *Old Negotiate*, and after grasping the youth's hand, he continued:

"These Texans an' myself were havin' a leetle chin-music, an' I l'arns from one thet Kent King escaped—"

"Ah! this is Mr. Tabor, I believe; and Seven-Foot Harry," and recognizing the different men around the table, Buffalo Billy greeted them warmly, and asked:

"Has Kent King really escaped?"

"Yes, and I have just told these gentlemen; he escaped from us near Santa Fe."

"An' he'll raise a breeze here when he comes back, an' we was bettin' thet he'd kill you, Billy," said *Negotiate*.

"And I take the bet, who will wager, and what sum?" fearlessly said the youth.

"I'll take your bet, sir," and a heavily bearded, stout-formed man stepped forward.

"You are a stranger to me, sir, and will have to plank down your dust, unless some one here knows you," said Buffalo Billy, eying the man closely.

"I am a stranger in Leavenworth, boy; but I have the money to deposit, and as I know Kent King well, I'll bet on his killing you if you have wronged him," replied the stranger.

"Wronged him! why who could wrong a wolf? and, if he is your friend, I will say that you keep low company; but what will you bet that he kills me?"

The man seemed angered for an instant at the outspoken words of the youth, but answered quietly:

"Say a thousand dollars."

"Whew! I'm but a kid, and you lay 'way over my pile—"

"Permit me to deposit the stake named?" and Ben Tabor the Texan stepped up to the side of the boy.

"No indeed, thank you; life is too uncertain to borrow money; but if this friend of Kent King, the Gambler, will say two hundred and fifty dollars, I'll put it up."

"Done! it's the amount you name, and I'll seek a stakeholder—"

"Hold on, pard; as you are a friend of Kent King, I am a little doubtful about your stakeholder, for my money was earned by hard work."

"Boy, do you dare say that mine came differently?" and the man turned fiercely upon Buffalo Billy, who answered:

"Take it as you please; you certainly look like a—"

"What?"

"Horse-thief."

Two hands fell upon their pistol-butts at the same time, but Ben Tabor the Texan sprung between the stranger and the youth and said, in his calm, forcible way:

"Hold! this must stop here."

"True, Mr. Tabor; I forgot that he was like a cat in a strange garret; for he is a stranger here, while I have a host of friends; come, sir, let us conclude our bet," said Buffalo Billy, frankly.

"All right; I was a fool to get angry with a boy; but who holds stakes?"

"There is the very one; here, Panther Kate! this way, please," cried the youth.

The one to which he called had just entered the room, and it was a young girl.

Yes, a girl in years, for she was but twenty, yet in the same ratio that Buffalo Bill was a man, she was a woman—one who in a few years had lived more than many do in a long lifetime.

Her form was perfect, and her fancy dress of beaded buckskin, with short skirt and tight-fitting waist, set it off to perfection, while her soft gray hat, turned up upon one side, gave her face a fearless, saucy air that was very winning.

In her belt hung holsters, that held two ivory-handled revolvers, and a knife was suspended to a short chain, while with a jaunty, devil-me-care air, she held a small rifle upon her shoulder.

Beautiful she certainly was, and her dark eyes had won many a heart that had failed to make hers ache in return.

In Leavenworth all knew her, for she had come there little over half a year before with a traveling dramatic company, and had remained when they departed, and was engaged as a singer and dancer at the town theater, where, after appearing each night,

she would mount her mustang and ride out to a little ranch she had purchased, two miles distant, where she lived alone, caring for her cattle herself, and devoting her days to hunting, for she was a superb horse-woman, and a crack shot; in fact, her deadly aim with the revolver had gained her her name, for one day she had killed two panthers with her revolver, as they were springing upon her.

Having finished her act at the theater, Panther Kate, or as she was known on "the boards," Kate Kearney, took a stroll through the various saloons, as was her wont each night, as though she was constantly on the search for some one; and, though no other of her sex dare go amid the wild set of men to be met there, she showed no fear, but was greeted with a sound of welcome whenever she appeared.

"Billy, I am glad to see you back; did you call me?" she asked, coming forward, the crowd giving way for her, while many shouted:

"Yes, make Panther Kate stakeholder!"

"Kate's the gal fer ter hold ther dust!"

"Kate don't gamble her duckits away!"

"Nor drink 'em up!"

"She's squar' as she's round in figger!"

Such were the cries heard on all sides, and the maiden touched her soft hat to the boys and turned to Buffalo Billy, who said:

"Yes, Panther Kate; I have just made a bet with this—this stranger here, that I kill Kent King—"

"Hold! is that your bet, youngster? I thought it was to be that Kent King killed you," interrupted the stranger.

"Make it as you please, and in either case let the winner get the money."

"All right; if he kills you, I win; if you kill him, you win."

"Yes, and Kate, you are to hold the stakes; here's my dust."

"And here is mine, girl."

"Let me understand fully the bet," she asked, quietly, and it was explained to her.

"Thank you; I hope you will win, Billy; you know where to find me, and this gentleman can look me up should he be the winner; good-night!" and taking the bag of precious metal, Panther Kate left the saloon.

CHAPTER VII.

THE AMBUSH.

A FEW moments after the departure of Panther Kate from the gambling hall, Buffalo Billy also left, having received a word from Ben Tabor, the Texan, that he wished to speak to him privately.

He had walked but a few steps up the street, when he turned just in time to see the

stout, bearded stranger with whom he had made the bet.

By mere chance he had drawn his revolver from its holster, having broken the strap, and seeing a suspicious movement of the stranger's hand, he leveled the weapon as quick as a flash and cried, sternly:

"'Twon't do, pard; I have the drop on you."

"Why, boy, do you take me for an assassin? I came after you to speak a word with you," said the stranger, gruffly.

"Yes, just one word, and from the mouth of your revolver; no, I haven't any trust in you, stranger, and I guess we better strike different trails," fearlessly said the youth.

"As you please; but if you would hear me I could arrange it so you could strike a rich lead."

"Don't wish to, for I'm happy as I am; think you'd better pass, Mr. Hairy Face."

The man seemed about to reply, but seeing some one approaching, walked away without a word.

"Well, Mr. Tabor, my stranger friend who backed King with his bet, just left," said Buffalo Billy, as Ben Tabor the Texan came up.

"You look as though you had had trouble with him."

"Oh, my belt is broken, and I drew my pistol, and fortunately just in time, as I believe it was that fellow's intention to shoot me, but it is time I was going home, as my mother will be anxious about me, so ride out with me for the night, for you'll be welcome."

"I have half a mind to accept your invitation; where is your horse?"

"Up at Dayton's shed."

"And mine is at the stable; I will get him, tell the boys I am going, and join you here."

"Done!" and the two parted to meet again within ten minutes, the Texan mounted upon a large black horse, and Buffalo Billy riding his sister Jule's bay mare, which she had loaned him to give Little Gray a rest.

"Well, where's Captain Dash?" asked the youth, as the two started on the trail to the Cody farm, distant about five miles from Leavenworth.

"It is from Captain Dash that I came here to see you; I first went to Denver, and missing you, struck a train and came on here."

"To see me?" asked Buffalo Billy in surprise.

"Yes; after the escape of Kent King, we went on to Santa Fe, and there we remained a week, looking for the gambler; but not finding him, and hearing that he had gone to Denver, the captain determined to go on to his home, being compelled for some reason

to do so, and offered me liberal terms to take half a dozen of our Riders and come and seek you, he promising to join us in Colorado as soon as possible."

"But why should he take so much trouble to send word to me?"

"Because he says you believing the Gambler Guide dead, would be taken unawares, and he felt that he would attempt your life; but warned, you could be on the lookout for him, and he sent you this little package, and you will find instructions written inside."

As the Texan spoke, he handed the youth a small package, which he placed in his pocket until he should get home.

"I thank you, Mr. Tabor, for your kindness; but when do you start West?"

"As soon as our horses have had a few days' rest."

"Good; I go along with a bull outfit, and there is a large herd of beef cattle to accompany it, and I know you can get a chance as herders with your boys."

"We'll take it, for we had a dangerous trip of it coming East by ourselves, as we waked up several bands of reds; but listen! there is trouble there—hark!"

A shot was seen to flash out ahead, near a thicket of cottonwoods, and a cry of pain followed.

"Come!" cried Billy, and driving their spurs into their horses they dashed forward, their revolvers ready for use.

A moment after they came upon a startling scene, for by the starlight they discovered a form lying upon the ground, and two men struggling with a third person.

Hearing their horses' hoofs, one of the men turned quickly and fired upon them, and, at the flash both Buffalo Bill and the Texan replied with a shot, and the man dropped in his tracks, while, with a curse his comrade turned to run into the thicket, with the one he had been struggling with in his arms.

But quick as was his motion, quicker was the act of the Texan, who sent a lasso whirling over his head, and with a sudden jerk the fugitive was brought to the ground, while throwing himself from his horse, Buffalo Billy bent over him, and placed his revolver to his head, while he cried:

"By hokey! it's Panther Kate he's got."

"Yea, Billy; they lassoed me and jerked me from my horse, and though I managed to draw my pistol and killed one of them, they caught me at last," said the girl, rising from the ground, as the youth released her from the lariat of the Texan, which had encircled her head also.

"Don't p'int thet durned iron at me, pard, fer I is surrendered," said the ruffian, pleadingly.

"I've a mind to let it go off and save trouble; shall I, Tabor?" asked Billy, as the Texan approached and raised his sombrero politely to Panther Kate, who stood by with folded arms, perfectly cool after her adventure.

"As you please, Billy; I guess nobody'll mourn for him."

"Oh, Lordy! Pard, yer wouldn't do it; I knows you, Bill Cody, an' yer heart is too tender."

"And I know you now, Vagabond Joe, and that you were in the attack upon my mother's house the night I made wolf-meat of two of your gang, and now I catch you waylaying a lady on the trail, so I believe I'll kill you."

Buffalo Billy spoke in such a cool, decided tone, that the prisoner really believed his last hour had come, and said in a pitiful tone:

"Don't, Billy, for the love of God! don't do it, fer I is only a poor vagabond."

"I know that, and I will spare your life, with this gentleman's consent, if you will tell me the truth."

"I'll do it ef it chokes me, Billy!" said the villain, eagerly.

"Who are those two stiffs there?"

"They isn't angels, Billy."

"A blind man could see that; who are they?"

"Dead Beat Dan and Nosey Thompson."

"I expected as much; a precious set of rascals you are—"

"Not me, Billy; you knows I is only a poor vagabond."

"You are worse than the others, for you are a coward with your villainy; now tell me why you attacked Kate Kearney to-night?"

"For duckits."

"To rob her?"

"No, we was only goin' ter borrar a leetle o' ther stake-dust she held fer you an' ther capt'in."

"The captain; who do you mean?"

The man was silent as though he had said more than he wished; but seeing his hesitation, the Texan asked:

"Do you know the man that made the bet with my young pard here?"

"I is answerin' questions only ter Billy, an' I tells him ther truth," doggedly replied the vagabond.

"It will blister your tongue, Vagabond Joe, I'll wager; now tell me, were you at my mother's house the night of the attack on it, before the Hale train started West?"

"I was holdin' ther horses, Billy."

"Yes, for you hadn't the pluck to be in the attack; now who led that attack?"

"I will be kilt if I tells."

"You'll be killed if you don't."

"Oh, Lordy!"

"No praying, Joe; who was it?"

"You won't tell I told you, Billy?"

"I'll do as I please; who was it, or—"

"*Kent King.*"

"As I thought; he thought he had killed me when he shot at me that day behind my back, and wished to carry off my sister Jule; but he failed; now I will let you go, Joe, if Kate and my pard say so, but beware that I do not catch you in any more deviltry."

"I'll jine ther Gospil Mill on Sunday, an' ther Watertanks at ther next weekly meetin'; I will fer sure."

"You had better keep away from the church and the temperance lodge too, for you would demoralize them; shall we let him go, Kate?"

"I don't care, for he's a kind of half-witted fellow, and they did not get my money," she said pleasantly.

"I has better sense than many who thinks I is a fool."

"Then let us hand him over to the authorities for attempt to rob and murder on the highway," quickly replied the girl.

"No, no, Panther Kate, I is a fool—a durned fool; ther dang-dang'dest fool you ever seen," whined the prisoner in a tone that made the three laugh.

"What say you, Mr. Tabor; you caught him?"

"In Texas we rope such fellows as he is up to a tree, and try him afterward; but as he has confessed himself a fool, and seems half-witted, let him go, on condition he buries his pards here."

"All right, Joe. you can—"

"Ask him first who he meant by the captain," whispered Panther Kate quickly.

"Yes, Joe; who did you mean by the captain who made the bet with me?"

"Was he a capt'in, Billy?"

"That is what I wish to know; who was he?"

"He said he were a stranger."

"Give me your lariat, Texas, and we'll—"

"No, no, Billy, I'll tell yer."

"Well?"

"It were ther same."

"What same? What do you mean?"

"Ther same as attackt yer mother's—"

"What? Kent King?"

"It were him, Billy; but fer ther lady's sake don't tell on me."

"But this stranger was stout, and—"

"Plenty clothes makes a slim man fat, Billy, an' his beard hev hid his face—"

"He is right; I now recall Kent King's eyes," said Ben Tabor.

"And so do I; come! let us go back to town, for I wish to see the Gambler Guide

too," and Panther Kate spoke with a voice that had lost its softness, and her face had suddenly grown white and stern.

"Joe, you are free, but bury your pards," cried Buffalo Billy, and bringing Panther Kate's horse to her, she sprung lightly into the saddle, and the three set off at a rapid gallop back to town, leaving the vagabond standing in the road gazing after them.

But one glance he gave, as they disappeared, at his two dead comrades, and with superstitious dread, he gave a yell of terror and darted away like a deer.

CHAPTER VIII.

A MYSTERY.

UPON arriving at the town, Ben Tabor suggested that Buffalo Billy and Panther Kate should await until he went to the gambling-hall and called out his half-dozen Texas pards, so that there would be no doubt of capturing the gambler, when they found out where he was quartered while in Leavenworth.

When the Texan had left, Billy turned to the maiden, and said inquiringly:

"So you know this Kent King, too, Kate?"

"Yes, I have known him for years."

"I believe his real name was Kenton Kingsland?"

"Yes, such was his name when I first met him; but tell me, do you think he can have escaped, Billy?"

"Oh, no; he hardly expected to have his disguise known to any one except his friends, and is doubtless at one of the hotels gambling."

"I hope so, for if he should escape me now, I would almost give up hope; but he cannot, for Fate will yet bring him face to face with me, whom he has so bitterly wronged."

She had spoken the last words more to herself than to the youth, and he remained silent, not wishing to pry into her sorrows of the past, until she suddenly asked:

"Billy, did you ever hate any one?"

"Oh, yes, and I'm a good hater when I try."

"So am I; I hate as I love, with all my heart and soul, and I now hate where I loved, for once, in the long ago, Kenton Kingsland was the very idol of my heart; but now, Billy Cody, I hate him more than I ever loved him, and I have sworn to track him to his death."

"It was to find him that I came to Leavenworth, and found he had left but a few days before for Colorado, and I determined to await his return; now, at last, it seems as if I could keep my oath, for you will not stay

my hand in my revenge, which is so sweet to me! You will not, Billy, will you?"

"You would not kill him, would you, Panther Kate?"

"As I would a snake in my path," she answered fiercely, and before she could say more, Ben Tabor and his comrades came out of the tavern and joined them.

"He has gone to the cabin of a gambler with whom he is stopping, and this man says he knows where the place is."

"Yas, I knows every crook an' hole in Leav'worth; don't I Billy?"

"You do indeed Old Negotiate; who is the stranger stopping with?"

"Dandy Daly, the card-sharp."

"A precious rascal too; where is your horse, Negoshy?" said Billy.

"Chewin' grub in ther stable; I'll go foot-back."

"No, jump up behind me, for Princess will carry double."

"She'll carry a awful load o' sin with me on her back, Billy," answered Negotiate, and with a nimble spring he mounted behind the youth, and the Texans having returned with their horses, the party set off at a gallop, the teamster remarking:

"Is yer huntin' in comp'ny with gals now, Billy?" and he cast a sly glance at Kate Kearney.

"Yes, Negoshy; you are not opposed to pleasant company, are you?"

"Nary; I likes her, Billy, an' she gits a pinch o' my dust ev'ry night at ther theater; but soon as she hes slinged her pretty feet, an' sung a song, I skips, fer durn ther balance o' ther crowd, they is so doleful; she's jist ther gal I'd like ter splice with fer life."

"Why don't you ask her to marry you old man?"

"Ask her to marry me? I'll fight the Sioux nation fust; but thar's ther cabing o' Dandy Daly, the card sharp," and Billy drew rein, as Negotiate pointed to a log-cabin standing alone and about a hundred yards back from the road.

A short conversation, and it was agreed to approach the house on foot, and that Old Negotiate should knock and tell the stranger that Dandy Daly wanted to have him come back to the Hall, for they had left that worthy playing cards when Ben Tabor called his Texans out of the saloon.

When he stepped out of the door they were to seize him, but under no circumstances take his life.

"No, he must not be hurt, for I have to deliver him to Captain Dash, who will take him to Texas to be hanged," said Tabor.

"I would go to the end of the earth to see King Kent die!" said Panther Kate, fiercely.

Having arranged their plan to capture the disguised gambler, the party softly approached the house, in which a dim light was burning, and Old Negotiate knocked at the door.

"Well, who is it?" came from within in a deep voice.

"It's only me, an' ther Dandy card sharp says as how he wants yer at ther Hall ter chip in a leetle game," said Old Negotiate, in an innocent tone.

"Tell him I have gone to bed and am not well."

"I'll tell him, but he's got a prime chip in fer yer," urged the teamster.

"All right, I will come," and with a muttered oath at having to dress and retrace his way half a mile to the Gambling Hall, the man arose and began to put on his clothes.

Presently the heavy bar was removed from the door, the key was heard to turn in the lock, and a head was thrust carefully out, and the eyes narrowly searched the surroundings.

But as if assured of no lurking danger, the man stepped out, and turning, locked the door, just as two dark forms bounded around the corners of the cabin, and he was seized in a grasp he could not shake off.

In vain did he strive to beat off his assailants and to draw his weapons; he was held in the clutch of Seven-Foot Harry and Ben Tabor, and seeing around him half a dozen more, while the cold muzzle of a pistol pressed against his temple, he ceased resistance, and said in surly tones:

"Well, who are you, and what do you want with me?"

"We are Texans," said Ben Tabor quietly.

"Ha!"

"Yes, and Revolver Riders, who acknowledge Captain Dash as our chief."

"I know nothing of him or his cut-throat band."

"You are mistaken; you escaped from us when we were on the trail for Santa Fe; but this time you shall not escape, Kent King."

"Yes, I am Kent King, and you have me fast, but I do not despair," was the reckless reply.

"You have no hope, Kenton Kingsland, for I am on your trail!"

"Great God! Kate Colvin! is it you or your ghost?" and the man shrunk from her, as though from a spirit of the other world, while a bitter laugh broke from her lips as she replied:

"I am no ghost, sir, as you will find out."

"A healthy ghost she is, pard," put in Old Negotiate.

"Come, let us be off," said Ben Tabor.

"But where will you take him?" asked Buffalo Billy.

"I hardly know. Our horses need rest before we take the trail again, and we dare not go with the train we intended," answered Tabor.

"No, we will have to risk it alone; but I know the trails, and we will get Old Negotiate to go with us, and that will make, with your party, nine of us to stand off the Indians," said Buffalo Billy.

"And I will go too."

"You, Kate?" asked Billy, in surprise.

"Yes; I will not lose sight of this man, and more, if you know no place to take him, until you start West, bring him to my cabin; he will be safe there."

"No, no, she will kill me when I am bound and cannot defend myself," said Kent King.

"I will pledge my word not to do so; I will cancel my engagement at the theater and guard this man, for I will revel in seeing him die," and the voice of the woman proved how deeply she was moved.

"What say you, Cody?" asked Tabor.

"I see no other plan; Kate certainly can keep an eye on him."

"Well, to your cabin we go; and, boys, you can return to the tavern, and I will come in and see you to-morrow; my man, do you want to join our party in going West?" and Tabor turned to Old Negotiate, who answered, promptly:

"I'll bet yer ther Gambler Guide heur, ag'in' Panther Kate I does, an' I hes a horse as is lightnin', an' Billy knows I is quick on ther shoot."

"Very well, go up to ther tavern and bunk in with my pards; but not a word of our night's work, mind you," and Ben Tabor called to Seven-Foot Harry to throw the bound prisoner up behind him, and, with Buffalo Bill riding on one side, and Panther Kate on the other, they started for the ranch of the latter.

It was a small, stoutly-built, two-roomed cabin, with several out-houses near by, and two huge dogs to act as guardians, and who greeted the party with savage barks.

But a word from Panther Kate quieted them, and she dismounted and threw open her door, and carrying the prisoner in their arms, the Texan and Billy entered.

"Lay him there, please; here, Satan, watch this man, and if he attempts to free himself, take hold of him."

The huge dog seemed to understand fully his mistress's command, for he crouched down by Kent King, who lay bound hand and foot upon the floor.

"I think we can leave him now, Billy."

"I think so, too; good-night, Kate," answered the youth.

"Good-night, gentlemen, and I thank you for saving me from those villains to-night, but more for bringing me face to face with that man," and she pointed to the prisoner, who had closed his eyes to avoid the stare of the dog.

Mounting their horses, Buffalo Billy and Tabor rode rapidly away, and arrived at the farm just as Jule Cody was mounting a horse to ride to town to discover if harm had befallen her brother.

Introducing the Texan to his mother and sisters, who extended him a warm welcome, Billy turned to the lamp to examine the package sent him by Captain Dash.

To his surprise he saw that it was a large and beautiful diamond, and upon a piece of paper was written in the Texas chief's hand:

"Load one chamber of your pet revolver with this diamond as a bullet; mark which it is, and keep it to send into the heart of Kent King, the Gambler Guide, whenever you again meet him.

"I have the mate of the stone I send you, and keep it for the same purpose should he cross my path.

"CAPTAIN DASH, OF THE REVOLVER RIDERS."

CHAPTER IX.

A WOMAN'S LOVE.

"WHILE there's life there's hope, so I'll not despair yet; but I would rather be at the stake than facing this monster, whose eyes glare into mine whenever I open them.

"Bound as I am, it is enough to drive me mad; and yet I dare not appeal to Kate for mercy; no, no, for a woman's love turned to hate is deadlier than the serpent's sting," and Kent King gave a glance toward the door through which Panther Kate had gone into the other room, as soon as Buffalo Billy and the Texan had ridden away from the cabin.

But as he turned his head Satan gave an ominous growl, and once more he closed his eyes.

Yet closed, he could see those red lips, white teeth and glaring eyes above his face, and, brave man though he was, the sweat stood in beads upon his forehead, and he became strangely nervous, which increased until human nature could bear no more and he shrieked forth:

"Kate! Kate! for the love of God kill me and end this misery."

At his cry the huge dog had sprung upon his breast, his teeth ready to bury themselves into his throat, while he growled savagely to warn the prisoner to make no effort to escape.

A quick tread followed and Panther Kate entered the room, and she asked, quietly:

"Well, sir, did you call?"

"Great God! have you no heart, woman?"

Do you not see this monster upon me, and that I am going mad?" he groaned.

"Ha! ha! ha! then you *can* be made to feel, Kenton Kingsland?"

"I believed you callous to every emotion, though time was when you professed feelings, as do other people possess; I am happy now, sir, for I gaze on you writhing in mortal anguish."

Her voice was hard, her eyes burning, and her bosom heaved convulsively, as though the inmost depths of her being were stirred.

"Kate, I have wronged you bitterly; more than human being can forgive, and yet I beg you to remove this devilish beast from my breast, or I will go mad," he said, pleadingly, and something in his tone told her that he spoke the truth, and she called to the dog, who at once obeyed her and walking to the corner lay down.

"God bless you, Kate, for that act; if you desire my death, kill me, but do not torture me beyond human endurance again."

"I have sought you to kill you, Kenton."

"Then do so; life has no charm for me now, and I have often sought death, but it would not come to me."

"You speak falsely, Kenton, for you have ever clung to life with strange tenacity."

"Once I did; but Kate, since—since—"

"I am listening, sir."

"Since the night that—that—"

"Let me complete your sentence; since the night you saw me raise to my lips the fatal drug you had prepared for me, you have been haunted by a phantom."

"Yes, Kate, and bitterly have I been punished for that crime.

"I was mad then, for I knew that you loved me, and I loved you more than all else in the world; but I owed large gambling and other debts, and had no money to pay them with, but, believed rich, I had an opportunity to marry an heiress, who, when we became engaged, was to turn over into my keeping her vast wealth.

"Our marriage was a secret one, and none knew of it, and driven to desperation by my debts, I one night prepared two glasses with poison, intending that you should drink the one, and I the other, and we would die together.

"But coward that I was, I saw you drink the fatal draught, and I touched not my lips to mine, and ere I could summon aid you were, as I believed, dead.

"Oh, Kate! no one knows my misery then, and in terror I fled from you, and from her who would have brought me riches, and sought a refuge amid wild scenes and wilder men."

"Hold! have you told me all the truth,

Kenton Kingsland?" she asked in a low, stern tone.

As if determined to hide no atom of his guilt, he continued:

"No, Kate, not all; for, possessing, as you know, a strange power of imitation, I wrote a note, copying your hand, and saying that you were tired of living and had ended your own life."

"I have that note with me, sir."

"That caused people to believe you had committed suicide; more I cannot tell you, Kate."

"But I can, sir; I was believed dead, dressed in my shroud, and *buried*, ay, *placed in my grave*, Kenton Kingsland, and left to my last sleep among the dead."

"But avaricious eyes had seen that my diamond rings were left on my fingers, and that night ghouls of the grave came to rob me, and when they broke open the casket, the effects of the drug had worn off, the fresh air revived me, and I arose in my shroud and put to wild flight the base robbers of the dead."

"Can I forgive you that, Kenton Kingsland?"

"No, I do not ask it—yes, I do ask it, for you can forgive me if you love me as I do you; forgive, forget me, and I will go happy to my death."

The man tried to stretch forth his bound hands, and half-raised himself from the floor, while his voice was full of pleading, and his eyes bent on her with all the fascination he could throw into them.

She was a woman, and she had loved him with all her soul; even when she had been a girl of fourteen, he had gotten her a position as a child actress.

She had suffered much, but she believed he had also, and being a woman, her love had turned to hatred in a night, and now, in a minute, it flew back from hate to passionate idolatry, and she flung herself upon him, bound as he was, and cried:

"Kenton! Kenton! I do forgive you all, and I will forget all; only come back to me, love me and caress me as in that olden time when we were both so happy!"

A triumphant light flashed in his eyes, but he said sadly:

"This is beyond all hope, Kate; now I can die content."

"*Die!* You shall not die, Kenton, for I will protect you; see, I sever your bonds, and—ay, we will fly together far from here, for I have two fleet horses in the stable."

"Come, throw off those suits that disguise your form; pistols, rifles and all I have here, so come with me, and woe be to him who would stand in our path."

The woman was now almost hysterical

with delight and nervous dread combined; but a few calm words of the man soothed her, and an hour after they left the cabin, both of them disguised beyond recognition.

CHAPTER X.

BUFFALO BILLY RECEIVES A LETTER.

AFTER a substantial breakfast, which both the Texan and Buffalo Billy ate, as only plainsmen can eat, the two mounted their horses and wended their way to the cabin of Panther Kate, determined to make arrangements for an early start West.

The huge dogs greeted their arrival with ferocious barking, but no answer to their call came.

The cattle had spread over the prairie, and the chickens stood around the cabin as if waiting for their morning meal.

Riding up to the door Billy knocked loudly, but still no answer came.

"Great heavens! what can have happened?" said Ben Tabor, while Buffalo Billy replied:

"I hope he has not released himself and harmed Kate. I know not what to think; but there is a way to find out," and he attempted to dismount, when the dogs rushed to attack him.

Regaining his saddle he drew a revolver, and two shots ended the career of Satan and Beelzebub, as Panther Kate had named the twin canine monsters.

With a rail, Buffalo Billy and Tabor then burst in the door, and they found the cabin vacant, and more still, the evidence that it had been purposely vacated, for articles not convenient to carry were strewn about, while other things of use had evidently been removed.

The thongs that had bound the prisoner lay upon the floor, the lamp still burned on a table, and going to the stable they found Panther Kate's two riding horses gone.

"Well! who would ever have believed that woman to be treacherous?" said Ben Tabor.

"I don't understand women, Ben, but I never thought Panther Kate would go back on her word, for she certainly has helped Kent King to get away; but let us go on to town and see if we can strike a new trail."

Rapidly the two now rode on into Leavenworth, and there a new mystery awaited them, for Jack Coes, the keeper of the tavern, handed Buffalo Bill a note, he said had been brought him from Panther Kate.

Opening it, the youth read:

"BILLY:—

"If I have broken faith with you blame a woman's love, for in such cases the heart, not the head governs her actions.

"The stake money I still hold, and as you know whom it was you made your bet, you will see

that I can continue to hold it, until one or the other wins it, a consummation I devoutly pray shall never happen; not that I wish to keep the gold, but that I hope that neither you nor Kent King will die as the wager suggests.

"He befriended me as an orphan child, and laid the foundation for a career that would have made me famous, had not circumstances forced me to follow him, believing myself to be wronged by him.

"Now the dead past is buried between us, and hope beckons us on to a future of bliss, and we fly far from here.

"May you be happy, prosperous, and some day win a name that you have talent, courage and ambition to do, is the wish of

"Your friend, PANTHER KATE,
"Now, Mrs. Kenton Kingsland."

"Well, that settles it, and I fear we will never find them," said Ben Tabor, when he had read the letter which Billy had handed to him.

"Oh yes, for I must win my bet, and I know Kent King, with the same prospect in view, will never leave this country, no matter what he may promise Kate—here comes Seven-Foot Harry."

"Yes, I sent him to the cabin of Dandy Daly! What news, Harry?"

"He has taken his horse, saddle, bridle and arms from the cabing, and were seen at one o'clock, making tracks on the trail west, along with a boy, I judges were Panther Kate."

"All right; we will spend this day in striving to find their trail, and if we do not succeed we will have to wait and go West with the bull outfit."

"It is all we can do, Ben," answered Buffalo Billy, and at once the hunt for the fugitives began, many of the citizens joining in the search, for it was whispered around that Kent King, the Gambler Guide, had come in the night and kidnapped Panther Kate, and no one who knew the truth contradicted the statement.

CHAPTER XI.

PARSON BRISTOW HOLDS TRUMPS.

At length the day for the train to start on its long western trail rolled round, and all was bustle and confusion in and around Leavenworth, for Russell, Majors and Waddell were sending out a larger bull outfit, as they were called, than usual, and a quantity of beef-cattle for the western forts were to be driven along in company with it.

Ben Tabor had been appointed chief herdsman, and, with his men was very busy getting the cattle together, while Buffalo Billy had volunteered as hunter, intending, when the train struck the South Platte, to branch off to Julesburg, where he hoped to find Alf Slade, to whom he had to report as a Pony Express Rider.

A short while before the train pulled out from its encampment, the stage from St.

Louis rolled up to the tavern, and the driver, Bob Briggs, sung out in his cheery way:

"On time, landlord, fer the western-bound train?"

"Yes, just in time, Bob, you have driven hard, and are ahead of time."

"Yas, always clever to obleege calicoes and preachers, fer I hes some bound West; 'light, parson, fer our journey hes ended right heur, an' ef yer were a gin-slinger, I'd ax yer in ter take a drink, out o' thanks fer yer pra'ers fer me, an' ther sweet voice o' yer darty, fer I hasn't seen her face," and Bob Briggs sprung nimbly from his box and assisted to alight an elderly gentleman with smooth face, long white hair, gold spectacles and a suit of clerical black, and high hat with a band of deepest mourning surrounding it.

Behind this pious-looking individual came a young girl, with a wealth of golden hair peeping out from beneath her nun-like head-dress and heavy black veil.

"This are Parson Uriah Bristow, landlord, and his darty whom he calls Rebecca, and they is goin' West as missionaries ter convart ther red heathen from the'r bernightedness, so fill 'em with provender, fer we didn't stop fer breakfast, an' then hunt ther parson up a hearse o' some kind ter travel West with, fer he's got ther dust ter pay fer it," and turning to the clerical individual, Bob added in a low tone:

"Won't hev jist four fingers, parson, jist fer yer stomick's sake, an' good-fellowship?"

"No, I never drink; it becometh not my cloth," answered Uriah Bristow, in a sepulchral tone.

"Never 'rastle tanglefoot? Why, pard, yer doesn't know what is healthy; but hev a smoke?"

"I never use the intoxicating and damning weed."

"Ther deuce! what do yer do, pard, ter makes yer cheerful?"

"I am never cheerful."

"You look it; here, landlord, lead him in to ther hash bar, an' I'll bet he kin git away with viands, or he hain't like ther parsons as ust ter come ter my old mammy's home when I were a kid. Jerusha! ther chickens ust ter skip, ther sheeps bleat, ther turkeys gobble an' pigs squeal whenever they saw 'em comin', fer they knowed thar was ter be eatin' done."

The landlord came to the rescue, and led the doleful preacher and his deeply-veiled daughter into the house, which they left an hour after in an ambulance, drawn by two large mules, to follow the western-bound train.

Behind the ambulance were hitched two

splendid horses, which the parson had purchased for himself and daughter to vary the long ride by horseback exercise, and in the vehicle were many little things to add to their comfort.

To the captain of the train, Lew Simpson, Parson Bristow brought a letter of introduction from the general in command of that department, and asking that every courtesy be shown the minister and his daughter, who were going West as missionaries to teach the Indians at the agencies.

For days the train wended its way westward, making slow marches on account of its size and the large number of cattle along, but confident of no attack from Indians, as it was fully capable of taking care of itself.

At night, when gathered around the campfires, the train-people tried to draw the dismal-looking parson and his veiled daughter into their enjoyment; but the latter pleaded illness and the former said he never indulged in light amusements, and besought them to turn to prayer and psalm-singing.

This course naturally caused the cheerful members of the outfit to leave the parson and his daughter severely alone, a circumstance which they seemed to be pleased with.

But each day, as they went along, the daughter, whom persons at first thought to be shamming, grew more indisposed, until at last she was unable to leave her ambulance, and her condition excited the sympathy of all.

But like a tender, loving nurse her father hung over her, riding in the ambulance, and supporting her head through the long day's march, and ever attentive to her every want, when night came and they went into camp.

Touched by the suffering of the poor girl, whose life seemed slowly fading away from her, several of the emigrants' wives and daughters offered their services; but the father said he alone would care for her, and she seemed unhappy if he was out of her sight for an instant.

At last, one beautiful, moonlight night, when a hush had fallen on the train-encampment, the spirit of the young girl took its flight, and the wails of the stricken old man were pitiful to hear.

Two of the women of the train dressed her for her grave, a shroud of blankets encircled the fair form, and in a snowy bank, by the edge of a crystal creek, her grave was dug, and the body was placed in it just as the sun arose above the prairie horizon.

"Do not hide her from my sight; I will fill the grave myself; leave me, my kind friends, leave me, and ere long I will follow you," said the old parson, and one by one the people departed, the train pulled out of

camp, the last wagon disappeared over a rise in the prairie, and the voices of the cattle-drivers grew fainter and fainter in the distance; but still the old man stood, his hands resting on the spade left with him for his last melancholy duty to his dead daughter, whose form lay in the shallow grave, enveloped in the blanket shroud, and her face veiled as she had worn it in life.

A short distance away stood his horse awaiting him, and no sound broke the silence, after the shouts of the cattle-drivers had died away.

At length he went to work and slowly shoveled the earth into the grave with a strength and quickness one would not have looked for in a man of his age, and casting the spade aside turned away, mounted his horse and rode down the stream, instead of following the trail of the train; but his thoughts seemed far away, his head was bent and he seemed unmindful in his grief which way his horse was taking him, or that he had been warned of Indians lurking in the vicinity.

Hardly had he gone from sight, before through the timber from the opposite side to that by which the parson had departed, a horseman appeared in sight.

At a glance he was recognizable as Buffalo Billy, mounted upon his faithful horse, Little Gray, and, as though with a set object in view, he dismounted, and his eye falling upon the spade, he began to throw out the loose earth from the newly-made grave.

Diligently he worked, using great care as he dug nearer and nearer to the body, and so intent upon his work, as to be oblivious to all else.

At length the spade touched the blanket, and his hands were then used to scrape off the dirt, until the veil was visible.

Tenderly he drew it aside and gazed upon the face of the dead.

The eyes were closed, the hair was blonde, not black, but it was a face he knew well, and from his lips broke the cry:

"*It is Panther Kate!*"

"Yes, it is Panther Kate, and I am Kent King the Gambler Guide!"

Buffalo Billy started, and glanced up to realize that he was entrapped, for his belt of arms lay some feet distant, and he gazed into the face of Parson Bristow, but the spectacles, shoved up on the forehead, displayed the vicious eyes of Kent King.

CHAPTER XII.

CLOSE QUARTERS.

"It looks as though I was going to win my bet, youngster," said Kent King, with a sneer.

"You have got the stakes anyhow, by

murdering this poor girl beneath my feet, and of course I need expect no mercy," was the cool reply.

"Murdered Kate! what do you mean?" and the man's face turned white.

"I had a suspicion that you were not what you represented yourself, and when Mrs. Dooley, who had dressed poor Kate for the grave, told me that her hair had been dyed yellow, I determined to ferret out the mystery, and I have done so."

"You have run yourself into a death-trap, boy, and whether I killed Kate or not, you will never be called as a witness in the case."

"I'm not dead yet, old man."

"No, but you shall be within the minute, for I intend to kill you," was the deliberate reply, and Kent King's revolver covered Billy's heart, while he continued:

"But I want you to die with the pleasant thought that I am going West to marry Mary Hale—"

"I doubt it."

"Well, as you will not live to see if I do, you must take my word for it; after I have gotten possession of her fortune, for she has one the judge knows nothing about, she too will die of the same disease that killed Kate Colvin—namely, *poison*."

"Devil; if you don't kill me, and I ever have you in my power, I will carry you to Old Rain-in-the-Face, and have his warriors torture you to death."

"But you'll never get me in your power, Billy; but I have not told you that when I get Mary Hale's fortune, I intend to make your sweet sister my wife, for I love her as deeply as I hate her brother."

With a cry more like an enraged beast than a human being, and reckless of consequences, Buffalo Billy sprung from the grave toward his foe.

The flash and report of Kent King's revolver followed; but, taken so thoroughly by surprise at the daring of the youth, he missed his aim; but a second shot, as he ran backward, struck Buffalo Billy in the arm, and turned him half-round; but maddened now, it did not check him, and the third, fourth and fifth chambers of the weapon missed fire, and a yell of triumph broke from the boy, as he still pressed his enemy, who steadily retreated before him.

But the yell was answered by a score of war-whoops, and through the timber came dashing a number of painted savages.

Buffalo Billy saw that it would be madness to press his attack on Kent King, unarmed as he was, and turning quickly, sprung across the open grave, and seizing his arms, started in flight, at the same time calling for Little Gray, whom he had left in a thicket near by.

An answering neigh was heard, and the noble horse came at a run, the reins and stirrups flapping wildly, while Kent King, who had not fled at sight of the red-skins, called out:

"There's your game, men! A thousand dollars for his scalp."

With wild yells they started in pursuit; but the youth had already reached his horse, was in the saddle, and had unslung his rifle from the horn and brought it to his shoulder.

A shot, and down went a pursuer, and a volley was sent after him, but flew harmlessly by, and like the wind Little Gray sped away, for he knew well that his young master depended wholly on him for his life.

But, with the disguised Gambler Guide at their head, the pursuers pressed on, and from between the set teeth of Buffalo Billy came the words:

"They are Bandits of the Trail, disguised as Indians, and Kent King is their chief."

CHAPTER XIII.

MARY HALE.

IN a comfortable log cabin, containing four rooms, and surrounded by every evidence of a well-to-do borderman's home, sat Mary Hale, the fair maiden who in years gone by had won the boy-love of Buffalo Billy, when the two were at school together as children.

Then he had been her little hero, for he was her junior some three years, and she had been his belle ideal, in all that made up lovely maidenhood.

As she budded forth into the woman, Buffalo Billy relinquished all claims upon her heart, claiming only her friendship, and a noble friend he proved to her, and as she sat there in her frontier home, pearly tear-drops chased each other down her cheeks, and her mouth quivered, for her father had brought her sad news only a short while before, to the effect that the expected train had arrived from Leavenworth and along with it Ben Tabor and his Texas pards and Old Negotiate, who had been initiated as a member of the band, but that no tidings had they had of Buffalo Billy for weeks.

He had left camp before daylight one morning, 'twas said, to go on a hunt, and since then he had not been seen, and though the train had halted for two days, and parties had been sent out in all directions, no trace of him had been discovered.

The last to see him was Parson Bristow, who had said that while he was throwing the earth into his daughter's grave, the youth had joined him and aided him in his sad work, and when he had left the timber to overtake the train, Buffalo Billy had said he would remain and hunt for game.

Ben Tabor and his Texans had gone back to the timber, where was the lone grave of the young girl, and had seen there the tracks of the youth and Little Gray; but also had made a discovery which filled them with dread, for there were signs of a large party of horsemen having passed that way, and not far distant was another new-made mound.

Eagerly had they thrown out the earth, expecting to find the body of the youth; but with glad hearts they saw that it was not the face of their comrade.

And yet, from one to the other they glanced with looks of surprise, for though they gazed upon a painted face and a form clad in Indian costume, they saw beneath it the fair skin of a white man.

Further out upon the prairie, as they followed the trail of over a score of horses, they found a dead mustang, a bullet in his head.

"Ther gerloot in ther hole hed a wound in his head, an' this mustang died suddint like o' ther same disease, an' I'm thinkin' thet Billy boy were the child as did ther shootin'."

Such had been the comment of Seven-Foot Harry, and so had all agreed, and they followed on the trail to the hills, where they lost it, and, with their small force dare not go further, and gave the youth up as dead.

"Poor, poor Billy! I feared his reckless spirit would bring his life to an early end," mused Mary Hale, when she pondered over the story told her by her father.

Suddenly a hoof-fall caught her ear, and glancing up through her tear-dimmed eyes, she saw a horseman approaching the cabin.

Then, as she gazed, she recognized the rider, and her face flushed crimson, as a moment after he dismounted, and met her upon the piazza.

"Why Captain Dash; who would have expected to see you here?" she said in the innocent way a woman can assume in deceiving a lover, while she well knew she had expected, and hoped for his coming for months.

"You said I might come, Mary," he said in his sincere way.

"Did I?" she asked archly.

"Yes; have you forgotten the time when I struck your train with my Revolver Riders, and captured Kent King your Gambler Guide?"

"Oh no, poor Billy Cody led you there, and you both did me a noble service."

"Yes, poor Billy, whom some of my men report dead; but whom I intend to start on the trail to-morrow with my Riders to find."

"I fear it will be useless, from all my father tells me," she said sadly.

"It may be useless as far as finding the noble boy is concerned; *but not to avenge him*," and his voice became deep and stern.

"But you know not whom to strike as his murderers, Captain Dash."

"I do know; the man who pretended to be Parson Bristow—"

"Pretended to be, captain; why he certainly seemed a sincere Christian, for he came to supper with father last night, and was very entertaining, I assure you."

"As he knows how to be, for he was none other than Kent King."

"Kent King! that wretch! impossible, for you—" and Mary's face turned white, as she paused.

"No, I did not kill him, for he escaped from me before we reached Sante Fe, and in disguise; he was captured in Leavenworth by Buffalo Billy and some of my Riders, and again escaped through the love of a girl who had sought him to kill him, but changed her mind, and fled with him."

"In the disguise of a preacher he boldly joined the westward bound train, though Billy and some of my men were along, and he passed the girl, Panther Kate, also disguised, off as his daughter."

"That poor girl he poisoned by degrees, she not even suspecting it, and she was buried on the side of the trail, and at her grave Billy Cody found him, and recognized him by some means, and the boy was forced to fly for his life, pursued by the Trail Bandits who just then came up, painted as Indians."

"Can this be true?" gasped Mary Hale, trembling violently.

"I got it from one of his own men, whom I recognized, and hanged an hour ago, knowing him to be a renegade and murderer."

"And where is Kent King now?" asked Mary, in almost a whisper.

"He has fled, for it seems he saw us hanging the man, though we did not then see him, and he took to the prairie, with his band."

"His band?"

"Yes, he is chief of the Trail Bandits now."

"This is fearful indeed."

"But I shall soon be on their trail, and my Revolver Riders now number half a hundred, and we will bring back Billy Cody or avenge him fearfully."

"And you start to-morrow?" asked Mary, her voice faltering.

"Yes, I arrived in Denver a couple of days ago from Texas, where I had some business to attend to, for I am not altogether what you believe me, Miss Hale."

"What! do you wear disguises too, Captain Dash?"

"Only when necessary to track villainy to the fountain seat; but I mean, I am the owner of a large cattle ranch, and not a poor man, as being in command of a band of herders would lead you to believe."

"I have a score to settle with Kent King, and to find him, I joined the Revolver Riders, who made me their captain, and they are all now under my pay until I accomplish the task I have set out to perform."

"And God grant you may do it, Captain Dash."

"My name is Dudley Dashwood, Miss Hale; my men called me Captain Dash," said the handsome Texan with a smile, and he resumed:

"When we parted on the trail, long months ago, I asked that I might visit you here, and you said yes."

"And I assure you I am glad you have come."

"Thank you; but I was so bold then as to say that I loved you, although we had met but that once; and yet, in all the time that has gone by since then, I have grown each day to love you more, until you are now necessary to my happiness, and I have come to ask you to be my wife."

He took her hands in his own, and gazed down upon her bowed head; but she remained silent, and raising the beautiful face until he gazed down into it, he asked:

"Have I come in vain, Mary?"

"No."

The answer was very low, but he heard it and drew her gently toward him, while he asked:

"When am I to call you wholly my own, Mary?"

"When you have found Billy Cody, or run Kent King to earth," she said, almost sternly.

"Enough, I ask no more; but here comes your father, and I will ask him for this little hand, now that you have given me your little heart."

"If you could see how much love it held for you, and hatred of Kent King, Dudley, you would not call it little," she said, earnestly.

"Big heart, then; oh, Judge Hale, I am glad to meet you again," and the young Texan turned and greeted Mary's father as he came upon the piazza, evidently greatly excited.

"And I to meet you, Captain Dash; but, sir, that infernal old parson was no parson at all, but Kent King, our Gambler Guide, who has escaped and swept down the valley at the head of two-score renegades, burning and pillaging as he went."

"Ha! he has already begun his mad work, then?"

"He has, indeed, and the Vigilantes are organizing to go in pursuit; and more, he would have paid us a visit had not a band of miners turned him back."

"I will leave at once on his trail. Mary, I leave to you to say what I would have said to your father; good-by," and two minutes after Captain Dash was riding like the wind toward the encampment of the Revolver Riders, some ten miles distant, and in his heart were commingling the antipodes of emotions—hatred for the Gambler Guide, and love for Mary Hale.

CHAPTER XIV.

BETWEEN TWO FIRES.

WHEN Buffalo Billy fled from the horsemen, whom he now knew to be outlaws in the disguise of Indians, as they hailed him in perfect English, he felt that he was in almost as much danger as when he stood in Panther Kate's grave, with his worst foe standing above him, holding a pistol leveled at his heart.

His arm was bleeding freely, and he bound his silk neck-scarf around it below the shoulder as well as he could, fastening the knot with the aid of his teeth.

Though Little Gray was running well, he had seen hard service of late, and there were half a dozen horses in pursuit, fast as he was, that were holding their own with him, and one was steadily gaining.

To the hills, visible before him, it was half a dozen miles, and if Little Gray could keep up his rapid pace until he reached them, and Billy did not faint from loss of blood, he felt he would have a chance to stand off his foes.

But if his horse should fail him now in his hour of need, or if he should fall in weakness from his saddle, he knew his hour had come to die, for he was certain no mercy would be shown him.

With his lasso he secured himself firmly in the saddle, and with his knife gave the scarf around his arm an extra turn to tighten it, sticking the blade into his sleeve to hold it in place, and then he again looked behind him.

A long line of horsemen was strung out, according to the speed of their horses, and in advance, some four hundred yards away, he saw Kent King and a man disguised as an Indian riding side by side, and driving their horses on with spurs that brought blood at every blow of their heels.

"I wish that the train-people could see that parson now; I guess they'd think he needed praying for," he murmured; and then, as his own position struck him, he added:

"Well, a little praying for me, just now,

wouldn't do any harm. Come, Gray, come, for they are gaining on you, little horse, and the hills are yet two miles away."

The splendid animal seemed to feel all that was expected of him, and made a still greater effort, though no spur or lash had touched his glossy hide, and again held his own with the pursuers.

"That's it, my Bird of the Plains, fly from your foes, and save me now, as often you have before," and still more encouraged by his master's voice, the fleet steed sped on indeed like a bird, until the hills were not far away, and his pursuers yet two hundred yards distant.

"Another effort, Gray! try again!" cried Buffalo Billy, and the next instant the horse dashed into a low thicket, while, around a base of jutting hill, suddenly appeared half a hundred mounted warriors.

"Sioux, as I live! now, Kent King, look out," cried Billy, while a glance showed him that they had not seen him, and were taken by surprise at the sight of the pursuing party.

That Kent King and his band were also surprised, there was not the shadow of a doubt, for they quickly drew rein, a bugle call rung out over the prairie, and those in advance began to fall back and form for protection with those who were in the rear.

"They'll stand the Injuns off, and get away, though I wish they'd be like the Killenny cats—by hokey! they are sending a party to see who Kent King was in pursuit of; it's out of the frying-pan into the fire with me," and Buffalo Billy, who had temporarily drawn his panting horse to a standstill, now urged him on into the hills.

But though Little Gray did his best, the red-skins steadily gained upon him, and worse still, the boy became weaker and weaker, from loss of blood from his wounded arm, his head reeled, and presently as he penetrated into a dense canyon, he fell forward on the neck of Little Gray, consciousness having left him.

A few moments after the Indians came in sight and saw the faithful horse standing still, and his rider hanging over upon his neck, his lariat alone holding him in the saddle.

Recognizing them as foes, Little Gray, in spite of the dead weight upon him, and his fatigue, endeavored to escape; but the canyon soon ended abruptly, and the red-skins pushing him hard, he was soon in their grasp.

At first they seemed inclined to scalp the youth without ceremony; but seeing that he was not dead, they released him from the saddle and laid him upon the ground, while his arms were quickly distributed among

them, and Little Gray fell to the possession of a brawny savage, another of the party claiming the very handsome Mexican saddle and bridle, which were profusely decorated with silver, and which Seven-Foot Harry had given him in exchange for the youth's.

One of the warriors had at once gone off, and joining the band that were pursuing Kent King and his followers, had reported to the chief that the boy had been captured and killed, for he certainly had not anticipated that his comrades would show any mercy.

Finding that the outlaws were his superior in strength, owing to their rifles, the red-skin chief withdrew his party toward the hills, content with scalping a renegade in Indian toggery, who had fallen under their fire.

But, as they retreated toward the hills, with the outlaws sullenly retiring too, they saw the man they had scalped spring unexpectedly to his feet, and run for his comrades who at once started to his rescue, expecting the Indians would attempt to capture him.

But they and his scalp, and cared little for him, and he reached the band in safety, a piteous sight to look at, and told how he had heard of the capture and death of Buffalo Billy.

"Haddock, for those cheering words I would give a year of my life to save you; but you are badly wounded, besides being scalped, and—hold him up, men, for he's falling!"

But ere any one could catch him in their arms he fell dead on the prairie, and, remembering only himself, Kent King muttered:

"Now I can return to the train and continue on to Denver; and then, my sweet Mary Hale, we meet again, and you will have no boy lover to protect you, for the coyotes will feast upon him, and the loathsome vultures will flap their wings in his handsome face.

"By Heaven! Sioux, I could almost love you for the service you have done me, and grasp thy hands in fellowship."

And giving his instructions to the band of outlaws, whom he had had dogging the train from Leavenworth, he returned to the people once more whom he was deceiving under his disguise of a parson—a veritable wolf in the clothing of a lamb—and, as the reader knows, continued on with them to Colorado.

CHAPTER XV.

A FOE'S GRATITUDE.

WHEN the chief of the Sioux band entered the hills, and came to the spot where Buffalo Billy still lay insensible, he glanced into the upturned face and then at the long hair, and said quickly, in his native tongue:

"It is Pa-e-has-ka, the pappoose brave; my warriors have done well not to touch his

scalp or kill him, for he has served me long moons ago."

Bending over the youth, who showed signs of returning consciousness, he quickly stripped the sleeve from his arm and skillfully checked the bleeding of the wound, after which he dashed water in his face, and the eyes of the youth opening, met the savage countenance above him.

But he showed no sign of fear, and simply said in the Sioux tongue:

"Rain-in-the-Face, is it you?"

"It is the Sioux chief, whose son's life you once saved near Fort Laramie; the chief has not forgotten Pa-e-has-ka." *

"Do you intend to kill me?" asked the boy.

"Is the heart of Rain-in-the-Face so bad that he would kill one who saved his own son from death?"

"You are a jolly good old fellow, Mister Rain-in-the-Face," muttered Billy, his boyish nature breaking out; but he said aloud:

"The chief has a good heart to remember; but I am sick and weak, for I cannot rise."

"My warriors shall aid you."

"They ought to, for I see they have stolen everything I had," again muttered Billy, and he glanced at the dignified thieves as they stood looking at him, evidently suspecting his thoughts, and regretting that they had not killed him.

The chief saw his look, and recognizing that a raid had been made upon the youth's personal effects, he ordered every article to be restored at once, which order was obeyed, with anything in the way of clothing and little traps, though those in possession of his horse, saddle, bridle and arms hung back.

"The very things I can get along without they give back; what I want they keep, chief," said Billy, boldly.

Rain-in-the-Face turned sternly upon the offending braves, and one put down the knife, another a revolver, and at an angry motion from their chief, the other weapons were produced, while one young buck brought forward a dilapidated army-saddle, and still another a U. S. cavalry bridle the worse for wear.

"These are not mine, chief," said Billy.

"Do my warriors wish my heart to fill with anger against them?" sternly asked the old chief, and the delinquents then brought forward the bridle, saddle and trappings, while another came innocently to the front leading a gray mustang that was a fair picture of what Little Gray might become after a month's starving and hard riding.

"That is not my horse, chief."

"Yes," said the red pretender; "this Pa-e-has-ka horse; white mustang, much good," said the brave, in English.

"You are a red liar; if Little Gray looked like that the buzzards would follow him, and his backbone would cut through the saddle and split me up the back," said Billy.

Seeing that he could not fool the youth, ill as he was, the buck answered:

"It gooder horse your horse."

"You are a howling liar. Chief, I want my horse, not that skeleton."

Afraid of his chief, the buck now brought Little Gray, and Rain-in-the-Face saddled and bridled him for the youth, and placed him in the saddle, at the same time motioning to a young, light brave to mount behind him, and hold him on, for Billy was too weak from loss of blood to keep his seat unaided.

Then up into the hills the party went, and, after a ride of thirty miles, with frequent stops on account of the boy, the Indians arrived in their camp, and the chief carried his young pale-face friend to his own *tepee*, and ordered his squaw to do all she could for his comfort, while he went to bring the medicine-man of the tribe.

But the wound, the loss of blood and long ride to the Indian camp, brought on fever and delirium, and for weeks Buffalo Billy lay at the point of death, though all the time tenderly nursed by the Indians, in whose hearts, as soon as they knew how he had befriended their chief's son in the past, arose pity for him, while they had already felt admiration for his courage.

At length the strong constitution of the boy carried him safely through, and he arose from his bed of skins in an Indian *tepee*, restored to health once more, and with his wound almost well, under the treatment of the medicine-chief, who was certainly skilled in the healing of injuries from firearms and knives.

As soon as he was able to ride, Buffalo Billy thanked the chief for his kindness to him, and presented him with one of his three revolvers, and a brass watch he had bought in Leavenworth, and let him into the secret of winding it up; it was a stem-winder—and taught him how to tell time, adding:

"There'll be no excuse for you now to be behind time in going into a fight, if you'll only keep her wound up."

Rain-in-the-Face was delighted with his presents, but not more so than was the medicine-man with a bottle of Castor Oil, and another of Cough Syrup, which Billy's mother had forced him to take with him, but which he told the red-skin had been sent to him by the big medicine-chief of the Great Father at Washington, and wishing to try the efficacy

* Long Hair; a name given Buffalo Bill by the Indians.—THE AUTHOR.

of the pale-face drug, the Indian doctor took the contents of each bottle himself, a circumstance that determined the youth upon immediately leaving camp before the combined mixtures should lay the taker out.

Throwing his red silk handkerchief to Mrs. Rain-in-the-Face, who had nursed him, Buffalo Billy mounted Little Gray, and with a shout of farewell to the red-skins, struck off at a lively gait, for his faithful steed had had a long rest, and was better than ever before, as he evinced by his determination to cast the miles behind him, and reach the settlements.

"That's right, Gray; go ahead lively, for you saw Doctor Injun take that castor oil and cough syrup, and if the two don't kill him he's tin-plated, that's certain," and Billy cast a glance behind him to see if the medicine-chief had started the braves in pursuit of him; but no pursuers were in sight, and the prairie was open before him.

CHAPTER XVI.

PARSON MILLER VISITS THE JUDGE.

WHILE a number of the miners, and the settlers, under the name of Vigilantes, were following Captain Dash of Texas, and his Revolver Riders, in the pursuit of Kent King and his outlaw band, an individual of peculiar appearance was riding slowly along a trail, or more properly speaking, road, that led through the valley settlement, where Judge Hale and his train had found homes.

He was mounted on a mule, whom he had christened Goliath of Gath, and was dressed in a suit combining buckskin leggings, a miner's red shirt, a black clerical-looking coat, and wore on his head a coonskin cap.

This individual was Parson Miller, the chaplain of the Hale train on its route westward, and the one whom Buffalo Billy had gotten lost with, to prevent his marrying Mary Hale to Kent King.

Settling near the sutler establishment in Deep Creek City, as the dozen log-cabins comprising the place were called, Parson Miller had looked after his own bodily comfort, and the spiritual welfare of the flock which he claimed as his special charge, and whom he was wont to visit just at meal-time to save the expenses at home.

When presented to the reader now, he is on his way to the hospitable home of Judge Hale, who, believing him harmless, always extended to him a welcome, though Mary was never glad to see him darken the doors of their cabin.

"My dear Brother Hale, I have come over to see you upon important duty; the wolves are abroad among my flock, and bloodshed is stalking forth in our valley," he said, as he

dismounted from Goliath and picketed the mule, as greedy as his master, out to feed upon the grass of what was intended as a lawn, and would be in time.

"Come in, parson, and we'll have a chat in my room, for Mary is busy, as you hear, with her guitar on the back porch."

"It is of sweet Mary I have come to speak, and moreover of one other, Brother Hale; will we be wholly alone?" whined the parson.

"Wholly so; is there any news?" asked the judge, feeling a dread of coming evil clutch at his heart.

"None, other than I have told you of; of man's inhumanity to man; but now let us talk to the point. Do you not know me?"

The parson's manner had suddenly changed and he had dropped the sing-song way in which he always spoke, and Judge Hale looked him fairly in the face, and answered, slowly:

"No, though you recall one to me long since dead."

"Who is that one?"

"A clergyman who fell from grace, killed a friend, and was sentenced to prison for life."

"His name?"

"I care not to speak of it," said the judge with a shudder.

"It matters not; *I am that man.*"

"*You!* impossible, and yet—" and Judge Hale turned to the hue of a corpse.

"It is *not* impossible, Andrew Hale; we were boys together, and devoted friends; we married sisters, and became brothers-in-law; you became a famous lawyer, and I a minister until I at last, as you expressed it, fell from grace, and taking the life of a fellow-being, was sent to prison for life.

"My wife having died, I left you in full control of my large property, and the guardianship of my son, and for some years all went on well; but then you met with financial embarrassments just at the time I escaped from prison, and was reported killed by the guard as I reached the river; but I was not touched by his bullet, and a man in convict's dress being found some time after floating in the water, was said to be me, and so buried.

"Believing me dead, you used the property of my son, who had followed in his father's evil footsteps, and was serving a sentence in the Penitentiary, to squander his wealth in speculation, and, to escape his just anger, fled to Kansas with your child; do you doubt my identity now, Andrew Hale?"

"No; you are certainly Mathew Kingsland," said the judge in a hoarse tone.

"I certainly am, as is Kent King, the Gambler Guide, as men call him, my son

Kenton, and the first cousin of your sweet daughter Mary."

"And he knows this, for the power he held over me, and which forced me to say Mary should be his wife, was because he held my secret," groaned the judge.

"Well, the boy you know now in a different light, for he is the chief of the outlaw band known as the Nighthawks."

"And he is free to yet do my poor child harm? But God grant that those dashing Texans take him."

"Oh, the boy can take care of himself, and you will soon receive a call from him in some disguise or other, for he is determined to marry Mary."

"Heaven forbid! Why should he persecute her thus?"

"Oh, simply because she is rich, and he wishes to give up this wild life, and seek safety in another land, where he can live off of her money, as you did off of his," answered the man in a sneering tone.

"Marry rich! why, man, all I have in the world is in this cabin and on this ranch."

"Ah!"

"What! do you doubt me?"

"I *know* to the contrary."

"And I say you are mistaken; had I money do you think I would have come to this wild land to live?" angrily asked the judge.

"Yes, for dread of punishment for your crime, and of the world knowing of it, brought you here; now, you are believed only unfortunate, but were the truth made known it would be shown that you squandered a fortune left to your keeping, Andrew Hale."

"Alas! that I was ever tempted; but look at me now, a man at my years building up a new home, and penniless almost."

"You need not so remain, Andrew Hale," said the parson in a meaning way.

"What do you mean, Mathew Kingsland?"

"You have not come here and made yourself known to me without a purpose, I feel confident."

"I mean that if you will give me your note for fifty thousand dollars, payable six months from date, and agree to a certain plan I have in view, I will tell you where you can place your hands upon a million of money."

"What is your plan, sir?"

"That you marry Mary off at once to my son."

"Do you ask this when you know that I am aware of what he is?" indignantly said the judge.

"Oh, yes; you gave your consent before, when you knew that Kenton had served in

the penitentiary. Don't preach morality, Andrew Hale, for it does not set well on you," sneered the parson.

"Man, tell me what you have come here for, and at once."

"I need fifty thousand dollars to live on the interest it will bring, for I am getting along in years; and I wish to provide again for my son, whose fortune you squandered, and therefore I wish him to marry an heiress."

"And I tell you that I am little more than a beggar."

"Oh, no; a man died in the upper mines some days ago, and he made his confession to me, and left a will bequeathing a million dollars he had dug out of the ground to you and your daughter—"

"What?"

"True; I ask for only fifty thousand, and you will still have two hundred, as he left you a quarter of a million and Mary the balance."

"Do you mean this, Mat Kingsland?" and Judge Hale was very much excited.

"I do."

"Why was a man worth that sum working in the mines?"

"He was not; he had dug his gold out of California and gone East to find his relatives, and learning that they had come West, he sought them here in the mines, was taken ill, and died as I told you; that man was Ned Hale, *your eldest brother*."

Judge Hale could not speak for a while; but at last he said, fervently:

"Thank God!"

"You had better thank me, for you cannot get it unless I deliver up the papers, and I wish your note for the fifty thousand and to see dear Kenton and Mary married ere I do turn them over to you."

"If this fortune has been left me, I can get it without your aid."

"Oh, no; for I have the papers, and the lawyer and the witnesses are all in my pay; do you agree to the terms, Andrew?"

"I will give you one hundred thousand if you will not hold Mary in the bargain, for it is nothing more than a trade."

"And what about my poor boy?"

"Hang your poor boy!"

"No; that won't do; you have it in your power to redeem him from his wayward course—"

"Wayward! it is heinous."

"All right; we won't argue on terms; but you can redeem him and return him through Mary, the fortune you—well I may as well say it—stole from him; you can't object to his family, and he has sown wild oats enough already to settle down and reap a harvest of luxury and contentment; who knows? he

may repent him of his sins, and yet be a shining light in the ministry.

"Well, do you give the pledge?"

"Poor Mary!" groaned the judge.

"Why *poor* Mary? She will have vast wealth and a devilish handsome husband. Well, I am waiting."

"And I answer you. I was content here in my new home, and so is Mary, and she looks forward to happiness in the future; I sinned once, but I will not again, so keep your secret."

"Are you mad, man?"

"No; I am in the enjoyment of perfect sanity; keep your secret, Mat Kingsland, and keep away from my home, for I want no such devil as you are to darken my doors."

"Andrew Hale, you shall rue this," and the eyes of the villain flashed fire.

"I will have no threats from you, but I will give one; if you or your accursed son ever enter my house again, I will shoot you down as I would a mad-dog; now begone, sir."

"Judge Hale, be reasonable, for you are mad to throw away this fortune," still urged Mathew Kingsland.

"You are acting only for self-interest, simply to get your reward out of it, and I will be happy in keeping it from you."

"But dear Mary will be made unhappy by—"

"Dear Mary is happy, as she is with my father, Mat Kingsland. I order you from this house, for I have heard all that was said, and know your baseness," and Mary swept into the room as proud as a queen, and defiant.

"Ah! you then know that your father stole—"

"Silence, sir! he invested funds in his keeping in speculations, and lost thereby; it was, perhaps, a criminal act, but he is more than sorry for it, and he has just refused a fortune rather than do wrong again, and I refuse it with him; go, sir, or I will call Daniel to put you out," and Mary pointed toward the door.

"Girl, you and this old fool, your father, shall rue this act; I go, but I warn you that you will yet beg mercy of me."

Mary laughed scornfully, and the villain moved toward the door, and a moment after was riding away at a speed that Goliath of Gath had not been forced to for many a long day.

CHAPTER XVII.

MERCILESS.

"MENDEZ, I have service for you to perform."

The speaker was Kent King the Gambler Guide, and he stood upon a rock that

manded the entrance to a canyon in his front, and from which he had a view of the prairie a mile beyond.

It was a wild, picturesque spot, and the mountain retreat of the bandits, and a formidable position to attack.

The night before, with two-score of followers, he had gone to his retreat, after committing deeds of devilry a savage would have revolted at, and well he knew that the Vigilantes would pursue him, and that once aroused they would hunt him and his band to the death.

His men had urged that they keep the open trail and seek other scenes; but Kent King had an object in remaining, and was determined not to be driven from the neighborhood where dwelt Mary Hale.

Now, as he gazed far across the prairie, he saw a large body of horsemen approaching, and with emotions of dread, he recognized in advance Captain Dash the Texan, and his terrible Revolver Riders.

"We could hold out a week here, perhaps, but not longer, so I must act at once," he said, and then, having made up his mind apparently, he called to a villainous-looking Mexican standing near.

"Yes, Senor Chief, what would you have me do?" asked Mendez.

"Serve me well, and you shall have a golden reward; you have a fleet horse?"

"Yes, senor."

"Go and get him ready for a hard ride," and prepare your traps, for I do not care to have you return here."

The Mexican obeyed, not sorry to avoid the fight he knew was coming, and soon he returned to where the chief stood,

"I have written a letter here; take it to Parson Miller; you know where he lives, and he will tell you what to do; go by the secret outlet to this retreat, and ride like the wind."

"Yes, Senor Chief."

The Mexican sprung on his horse and rode away, while Kent King turned to his men, who were rapidly gathering around him.

"We are going to have a brush with the enemy, boys, but we can stand them off for a few days, and then secretly retreat at night; are you all ready for the fight?" and he glanced his eyes over the villainous-looking band, which certainly was a hard crowd, for there were German, Spanish, Mexican, American, Negro, and even Chinese brava-doers in the lot, and all of them men who were legal candidates for the gallows.

In half an hour more the Revolver Riders and Vigilantes came in sight, and camped in the valley below, as if they had come to stay and meant business.

Kent King watched them holding councils

of war with a sneer upon his really handsome, but cruel, dissipated face, and in his eyes shone a triumphant light.

When darkness at length came upon the scene, the camp-fires were lighted below in the valley, and it was evident that the Vigilantes knew just where their game was, and intended to starve them out, knowing that the entrance to the rocky bowl, or canyon where the renegades were, was under their control, and escape could be prevented.

About midnight the settlers moved to the attack from different points, though verging toward the pass, or canyon, leading to the retreat, and without the rattle of firearms made lively music.

But the bandits met them with coolness, and their deadly fire beat off their assailants, who were forced to retire to their camp and plan some other method of attack.

And thus the night and following day passed away, and the Vigilantes still remained camped in the valley below.

As soon as darkness came on, Kent King went the round of his forces, and then suddenly disappeared from the sight of his men.

Gaining a secluded spot among the rocks, where a number of horses were picketed, he quickly bridled and saddled his own animal, and mounting, rode quietly away.

Taking a path that led still further up the mountain, and which was a most hazardous trail to follow even in daylight, he went fearlessly along until he reached the summit of the hill, along the ridge of which he rode for half a mile.

Coming to a thicket of pines, he entered it, and found a path leading down the mountain-side, opposite to the one on which the Vigilantes were encamped.

Gaining the valley and a broad trail, he was about to urge his horse into a gallop, when he heard the clink of iron against rock.

Instantly he dashed into the shelter of some huge boulders, for he knew that there were horsemen coming, and quietly he awaited.

Presently dark forms came in sight, two horsemen abreast, and fully a hundred in number, and, at their head he recognized by the starlight, one who he knew was leading the Vigilantes and Revolver Riders to his stronghold.

It was Prairie Pete, one of the best guides on the plains and in the mountains, and the way he was riding, proved that he knew the secret, though dangerous path to the retreat, and the one by which he had just come.

They passed within six feet of the boulder, over the top of which he looked, and it was a moment of fearful suspense to him, for a movement of his horse, or a rider

swerving from the trail would have betrayed him.

With a sigh of relief he saw them pass on, and then, though he knew he could dash across a nearer path, gain the secret trail and warn his men, who could, thus warned, easily beat off their foes, he rode on his way, saying savagely:

"Let them capture them; what care I, for sooner or later they would all be hanged.

"No, I will look after myself only, and if Mendez served me faithfully, within twenty-four hours, I will be far from here."

And, as he rode along, there came to him the sound of distant firing and shouting, and involuntarily he drew up and listened for awhile.

"They have captured the retreat, and Trail Bandits are no more, for that is the wild Texas yell of victory," he muttered, and dashing the spurs into the flanks of his horse he rode on like the wind.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE FLIGHT.

THE third night after the departure of the Vigilantes rolled round, and the settlers in the valley were becoming anxious regarding their friends, for no word had come from them since they struck the bandits' trail.

And Mary Hale's beautiful eyes were dimmed with tears as she bade her father good-night and sought her room to retire, for she dreaded evil to Captain Dash, whom she loved now with all the fervor of her heart.

But hardly had she reached her room when there was a loud knock upon the hall door of the cabin, and Judge Hale called out:

"Well, what is it?"

"News from the Vigilantes, judge," said a voice outside.

"Who are you?"

"Martin Burke."

"Ah! one moment, Burke, and I will let you in," answered the judge, recognizing as he believed the voice of a settler down the valley.

The door swung open, and with it came a flash, and, a cry upon his lips, Judge Hale fell to the floor, while three men sprung over his body into the hall.

Those three were Kent King, Mathew Kingsland and Mendez, the Mexican.

"This is her room, Kent; come!" cried the old villain, and with one kick he drove in the door, and the three dashed through into the comfortable chamber, which the taste of Mary had made most beautiful and comfortable.

But they suddenly stopped, for in the center of the room stood the brave girl, her face pale, her eyes flashing, and her hand extend-

ed and holding a revolver in it, and as firm as a rock.

"Back, or I will kill you!" she said, firmly.

"Bah! she's but a girl; come!" cried Kent King, and the three sprung forward.

But the flash and report came, and the bullet, speeding by the ear of Kent King, buried itself in the brain of Mendez, the Mexican, who fell dead in his tracks.

Ere Mary could again fire, she was seized in the strong arms of Kent King, her cries were checked, and she became unconscious.

When at last she recovered her senses, she found herself held in the arms of a man whose face she saw distinctly.

It was Kent King, and she was held across the saddle, and before him, and his horse was going at a rapid gallop, while ahead was another horseman, whom she knew must be Mathew Kingsland, the pretended Parson Miller.

Pretending to be unconscious still, she remained quiet, and heard their conversation, for the man ahead soon dropped back and rode alongside, remarking as he did so:

"I am not sorry she killed the Mexican, as he would have continually bled us."

"Yes; I promised him a reward for his services, and my sweet Cousin Mary gave it to him; only it was lead instead of gold," laughed Kent King.

"You think no one heard the shot and will pursue?"

"No, my revered father, pistol-shots are too common to attract much attention out here; but if we are pursued it will be by a few decrepit old men and young boys, for all the fighters are out in the mountains after me, and will return to-morrow or next day victorious, in all save my capture, ha! ha! ha!"

"You are a very devil, Kenton."

"I am my father's son; but have you the relays of horses all right?"

"Yes, Mendez and myself placed them; the first relay is five miles from here; so we can urge these on faster."

"I wish Mary would recover, so I could force her to ride, and then we could dash rapidly along; but as it is, her weight retards my horse."

"She certainly remains in a swoon long, Kenton."

"Oh! it won't hurt her, and being unconscious is better than hysterics or shrieks."

"You will find her a hard one to tame, my son."

"I think not; I have ever been noted as a woman-tamer; but as I intend to reform now, and she gets a large fortune, and we go to Europe, I hope she will be sensible; if

not, she seals her own fate as soon as I get her money into my hands."

"I am sorry you shot her father, Kenton."

"Bah! regret nothing, my honored parent; if I allowed myself to regret the past, I would have troops of phantoms haunting me day and night; hullo! Mary is recovering."

"Fiend! murderer! release me!" groaned the poor girl, almost broken-hearted at the fate of her dearly loved father.

"No, Cousin Mary, I cannot think of such a thing; keep quiet and I will not harm you, but if you cry out, I will gag and bind you."

"Oh, God have mercy upon me!" cried Mary.

"Cousin mine, that prayer is more frequent on the lips of men and women than any other, and it is less answered," sneered Kent King, and grasping her more firmly in his arms he urged his horse on at a more rapid pace, and ere long they came to a secluded spot, a ravine, in which stood three horses, and by one a side-saddle.

"Now, my sweet cousin, if you will go willingly I will let you ride; if not, I will carry you," said Kent King.

"I will ride, if I must; anything to escape your loathsome touch."

"So be it; father dear, please saddle that white steed for my cousin, and then change our saddles."

"And what must we do with these horses?" asked the man, turning to those they had just ridden to the spot.

"Draw your knife across their throats."

"What!"

"Of course, for it will keep pursuers from following on them; why do you hesitate to kill a brute, when you have taken human life?"

"Boy, don't call up that phantom from the past!" sternly said the older villain.

"Bah! don't be a child; don't let the 'boy be father to the man!' Come now, my sweet cousin," and he raised the maiden to her saddle, but securely held the reins, while his father drew his knife across the throats of the two noble animals that had brought them there.

"You have those papers with you, old man, that give this fortune to Mary?"

"Yes."

"Be certain, for I want no mistake."

"I have them here in my pocket."

"All right; come!" and at once the two villains set off at a rapid pace, their unfortunate captive between them.

But hardly had they disappeared from sight, when a dark form arose from behind a rock and muttered:

"I am glad I hid here to see who came for those horses; now to head them off."

Darting through the thicket, the speaker soon came to where a horse stood awaiting him, and five minutes after he was riding swiftly along a rough trail leading up the valley.

CHAPTER XIX.

AN UNEXPECTED HALT.

SWIFTLY flying along in their flight, neither Kent King nor his degenerate father looked for danger ahead, and were brought to a sudden and unexpected halt by blinding flashes in their eyes and two sharp reports from a revolver.

Down beneath them went their horses, and as Mathew Kingsland struck the ground, a slender form darted cut from behind a boulder, and, at close range, sent a bullet crashing through the brain of the man whose life had been a lie and full of crime.

As if confident of his aim, the assailant did not wait to see the effects of his shot, but turned upon Kent King, who had sprung to his feet and attempted to draw his revolver; but the fall had broken his arm, and with a curse he seized the weapon in his left hand and faced his foe, who was advancing quickly upon him, while Mary Hale, spell-bound, sat on her horse like a statue, watching, waiting and praying.

The weapon of Kent King flashed first, but the aim of his left hand was untrue, for the one he fired upon still advanced upon him, and said in clear tones:

"Kent King, I shall win my bet."

"Great God! are you man or spirit?" cried the Gambler Guide.

"Neither; only a boy—*Buffalo Billy*," was the rejoinder, and with the last word two revolvers flashed together, and again the aim of Kent King was untrue.

But not so with Buffalo Billy, for he sent his bullet straight to the center of the forehead of the man he meant to kill, and did kill, thereby winning his bet.

With a cry of joy Mary Hale threw herself from her horse, and once more fainted, but Buffalo Billy caught her in his arms while he said to himself:

"It's only joy that has overcome her; but what a jolly position for me if I was her lover instead of a boy."

In a few moments Mary revived, and Buffalo Billy told her of his adventures in

the Indian camp, and suggested that they strike the back trail at once, which she gladly acquiesced in.

Tying the dead bodies of Kent King and his father upon Mary's horse, he gave the maiden a seat behind him on Little Billy, and just as the sun illumined the valley came in sight of the home of Judge Hale, around which was gathered a large crowd of horsemen.

As they drew nearer they were recognized; and such a shout of welcome went up as was never heard before in the Hale settlement, and Captain Dash rode toward them and shouted:

"Bravo! bravo! Billy, you're a man of men, and have saved us trouble, for we just returned victorious from the bandits' camp, and the judge told us of your capture, Mary."

"The judge! Is my father living?" asked Mary.

"He is indeed; the bullet grazed his temple, and stunned him only; see, here he comes to greet you," and the next moment the maiden was in her father's arms, and for a short while neither could speak.

But then the maiden told her story, and Buffalo Billy told his, and, as the Revolver Riders had wiped out the band of outlaws there was wild rejoicing in the valley.

CHAPTER XX.

CONCLUSION.

KIND reader, the papers taken from Mathew Kingsland, gave to Judge Hale and Mary their fortune, for the witnesses were looked up, and the money was found to be deposited in the banks, subject to the order of the heirs of the deceased miner, and back to their old home went father and daughter.

With Kenton Kingsland dead, Captain Dash's trail of hatred ended in the grave, and the loving sister, whom the Gambler Guide had falsely married, and who had died of a broken heart, was avenged; but the young Texan, Dudley Dashwood, struck a trail that had a happier ending, for it led him to the altar, with sweet Mary Hale for his "Pard," and Buffalo Billy was his best man, while Ben Tabor, Seven-Foot Harry, Old Negotiate, and hosts of others went East to attend the wedding of their loved leader, and envy him his beautiful bride.

THE END.

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